

Critical Play

The Productive Paradox

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We live in a world filled with marvelous, dreadful, funny, exhilarating, monotonous, and curious games. On laptops, monitors, phones, and beyond, digital technology is enabling play to emerge in new and unexpected ways. Games exist for entertainment, for passing the time, for fun—and they are older than human written language. Created with rules and bound in a particular time, space, or context, games display some of the most fundamental aspects of human life: collaboration, competition, and strategy. Games are indeed a form of creative and artistic expression, just like filmmaking is an art form, for example. What happens when games emerge as something more than mere entertainment and take on themes that elevate them to involve larger human questions, as art typically does? Just as there are many different types of films—some being “art films” that pose critical questions of the medium—games too emerge as having an edgy art segment in their field of creation. This chapter concerns games like that, games that require a type of “criticality” to play.

Computer games are more popular than ever before and have become a major cultural medium across a wide demographic range. From apps played on mobile devices to “Triple A” games featuring realistic graphics and played on a console box, games have indeed solidly entered everyday life and are interwoven with financial, social, and personal meaning. Games have been recognized as art not only for their aesthetics but also for their potential as sites for commentary and critical perspectives. Like other digital art forms, game-based works have increasingly become provocative and introspective as well as playful. Much of digital art treads into the domain of the playful, with tongue-in-cheek critiques of surveillance, re-examinations of our relationships with technology, interventions in social networks, and more. Indeed, a lot of responsive digital art has playful or even game-like qualities. And like other forms of art, games reflect the culture of their creation. In my 2009 book *Critical Play*, I trace the concept of “Critical Play” through what could be called an “art history of games.” Critical play, as a concept, seems to embody a deep contradiction. To be

critical does not seem whimsical or playful: it implies *analysis*. To play implies a certain fantasy or whimsy that criticality most certainly lacks. In this essay I would like to make some propositions about critical play by showing how the pursuits of artists have contributed to creating critical play in digital arts practice. I will explore the work of several artists and the games *Unmanned* (2012), *Mainichi* (2012), *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009), *Waco Resurrection* (2004), *[perfect.city]* (2009), *PainStation* (2001), *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), *Brainball* (1999), *[giantJoystick]* (2006), and others to offer three propositions from a critical play perspective. Games can be the means for creative expression, the instruments for conceptual thinking, and the tools to help examine social issues. These propositions will uncover strengths and weaknesses of games as a medium for social change and revolutionary play.

As media theorist Marshall McLuhan once stated, “New technological environments are commonly cast in the molds of the preceding technology out of the sheer unawareness of their designers” (McLuhan 1972, 47). McLuhan thus suggests that we initially do not have many ways and methods to examine the implications of new technologies, and thereby can make the mistake of misunderstanding the benefits and dangers of what has emerged. Because games are a cultural medium, they carry embedded beliefs about the culture in which they are created within their representation systems and structures. This holds true whether the designers intended to embed these beliefs and values or not. It has therefore fallen to fields such as philosophy and art practice to ask the big questions. These, and a sense of “critical play,” can be sources to draw from for the careful examination of games. Importantly, these questions arise from “networked politics”; critical games increasingly are easier to find out about, and the movement of indie game developers has become a strong and often critical community. Galvanized around festivals such as IndieCade, the cultural network of independent game developers dovetails with the culture of artists working in games. Indeed, crossover artists seamlessly operate in both networks.

The language of games is now very familiar due to the popularity of commercial video games. Artists disrupt this familiarity in interesting ways. Both the art world and the game world use the term “game art,” but it can mean very different things. In the commercial game world, “game art” can mean the graphics that go into a commercial game. In the art world “game art” constitutes a genre of creative works that reference or use games for conceptual artistic ends.

Thinking “Critical Play”

What does it mean to play critically? When is a game critical, and when isn’t it? Examining a dictionary entry for the key word “critical,” one can find several useful directions for answering these questions¹ First of all, a game could just *be critical* in the literal sense—make disapproving comments, or reach a negative conclusion about something. A political game that might criticize a particular party might be said to be critical on this level.

Secondly, being critical might mean to analyze the merits and faults of a work such as a film, or a game, to scrutinize it in the sense of “critical” acclaim or critics’ trashing of a new body of work. Yet there are many criteria and many critics to choose from, and looking at the acquisition of art games by art institutions such as New York’s Museum of Modern Art (Antonelli 2012), we can see that certain games garner more critical acclaim in arts circles than others.

Thirdly, criticality might offer a detailed and scholarly analysis and commentary: a critical edition of a book would include extensive notes and likely a revisionist reading. The heart of the matter really is this: throughout millennia, games have been used for critical thinking—of course, a playful type of critical thinking. Take, for example, chess: it is a game that lays out a clear and equal battle on a checkered board. Both players have equal opportunities; both have equal access to information. Chess is said to help players think strategically and understand cause and effect through time. Moves later, players might regret an action, or see the flaws in their opponent's strategies. This is possible because of the fundamental affordances of games themselves. A well-crafted game will allow for trial and error, for experimentation, for thinking ahead, for failure. But *further than that*, game art might be critical if it examines the medium itself. How does making a game affect the subject, the voice, and the point? Does the game reflect on the creation of games themselves? Games that can be said to foster critical play likely tread in this territory. While chess is a critical thinking type of game, the work *Rethinking War Games: Three Player Chess* by Ruth Catlow (2003), which positions two royal sides against each other while the pawns in the middle, played by a third player, try to stop them, is a game that reflects on the representation of conflict, and on ways in which games reinforce binary conflicts and new game goals (in the case of three-player chess, the goal of the pawns to stop the conflict) to create reflective, critical play.

Definitions of critical, however, can express an increasing urgency in their use. Nuclear reactors “go critical” when they are about to reach a new state; diseases reach a critical point where turning back is not possible. The urgency of criticality is upon us. Thus, looking at the merits of play, creating new readings, offering detailed analyses, and creating situations in which new ways of making games emerge are of crucial importance to both art and culture at this juncture. For example, it is a critical time for examining playful techniques and games with regard to their increasing use in systems that employ “gamification”—what I like to call “the slavery of play”—in education, health care, the workplace, and other contexts. It also is a critical time for examining the use of game-like interfaces for war. These issues are pressing, and are so right now because their emergence has happened quietly, and out of the light of the everyday citizen. Artists step in—lest we disregard the purpose of art entirely—to see things in new ways and share these reflections with all.

A Concise History of “Critical Play”

Artists have been fascinated with games and playing with conventions for centuries, but the popularity of play across 20th-century art movements led to the increasing incorporation of themes of play and games into artworks and into artists' processes. The Dada artists, operating in the period between World Wars I and II, were prone to absurd art that toyed with, and broke, previous “high art” conventions and also mocked nationalism and materialism. The movement was a reaction to the violence and destruction of World War I, which tore Europe apart with unprecedented violence. Instead of sculpting with clay or chiseling marble, Dada artists used found objects and everyday materials to express and transgress. Examples of Dada art include the found object sculptures and experimental writing of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, paintings and collages using chance in their creation such as those by Hans (Jean) Arp, and quirky found object sculptures by Marcel Duchamp such as *Fountain*, the

famous repurposed urinal exhibited in the New York City Armory art show of 1913. Before Dada, artists, according to Hans Arp, “attempted perfection; we wanted an object to be without flaw, so we cut the papers with a razor, pasted them down meticulously, but it buckled and was ruined ... that is why we decided to tear prewinkled paper, so that in the finished work of art imperfection would be an integral part, as if at birth death were built in” (Lieberman 1960, 58).

Adhering to the rebellious nature of the Dada artists, the surrealism movement emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s. Surrealists were characterized by a fascination with the mind and often used playful methods, such as parlor games, to tap into unconscious processes that could then emerge as new insights within their work. An example would be the *Cadavre Exquis* (*Exquisite Corpse*) in which one person starts a drawing on unfolded paper, and others finish it by folding their own section, so no one artist sees the product of the whole group until the end. While they also wrote fiction and poetry, Surrealists are most famous for their paintings depicting dreams and nightmares—think of the work of Salvador Dali or Remedios Vara—and their self-perceptions, infused with unconscious hopes and fears, as embodied in the works of Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst. The processes involved in creating such works were often playful, such as the use of automatic writing and other social games for developing ideas.

After World War II moved masses of artists around the world, performance pieces that broke down the barriers between performer and audience, bringing people together in space and time, emerged as a core artistic approach. In Japan Gutai art emerged, and, in the United States and Europe, Fluxus became a new form of avant-garde expression. Fluxus artists opposed the idea of precious art and instead tried to turn the everyday into art. They used performance scores describing everyday acts, as in Alison Knowles’s *Make a Salad* (1962) in which preparing a salad becomes a playful act of communal performance art. Commenting on her 2012 performance of the work under the High Line Park in New York City, Knowles stated, “The ingredients are indeterminate except that they’re edible. I don’t have anything funny in there. I don’t put popcorn in or something” (Morais 2012). Why shouldn’t making a salad be art? What can this type of work reveal about everyday life?

Fluxus artists used materials such as paper handouts and found objects for whimsical game boxes. The boxes offered unusual objects for play and created surprising, nonsensical combinations of materials and instructions to help players see the world in new ways. This is only a small sample of some of the 20th-century art practices that involved a critical use of play in the investigation of artistic concerns. The 20th century’s rich tradition of strange games, its fascination with chess, and absurd, playful performances were instrumental in how we see art today and how we can approach electronic games from a critical play perspective. Through a critical play lens we might better understand the deep significance of artists’ games such as *Every Day the Same Dream* or *Mainichi*—both discussed in the following sections, or propositions—which link players not to the “slavery of play” but rather to fundamental aspects of the human condition. The three propositions outlined in the following will reveal strengths and weaknesses of games as a medium for creative and revolutionary experience. If, as I argue in the first proposition set forth, that games always hold within them cultural beliefs, norms, and human values, then how are creative practitioners to tackle the thorny responsibility of creating games that not only reflect, but *revolutionize*, culture? How are games most effectively used in political and social change movements? Do games represent a different form of new media aesthetics?

Proposition 1: Critical Play Exposes and Examines Dominant Values

A critical play approach is built on the premise that games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Games—like film, television, and other media—are created by those who live in culture and are surrounded by their own cultural imaginary, and are a cultural medium that carries embedded beliefs, whether intended or not. Artists home in on the questions raised by these conditions in their work; therefore, artists using games as a medium of expression 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—and explore the material properties they entail, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions. Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of the game’s “content,” or an aspect of a play scenario’s function, which might otherwise be considered assumed or necessary.

In the online game work *Unmanned* (2012), Molleindustria and Jim Munroe feature a storyline focused on a US soldier who participates in combat by piloting unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs. Often called “video game warfare,” the practice of commanding UAVs, including drone planes, to attack suspected combatants has disparagingly been labeled a cowardly way to conduct war (Narcisse 2012). It is just that sense of distance, that sense of cowardice, which frames the reading of the central character of *Unmanned*. He is depicted in rough polygon graphics as an overly stereotypical, white, large military man whose day job is committing violence from afar (Figure 20.1). The pilot goes about his everyday tasks and players are engaged to help him with mundane activities, such as making sure he stays on the highway when driving, guiding his razor to shave, or playing military simulation video games with his son during “bonding time.” In addition to assisting him “mechanically,” players can enter into the character’s thought processes in simple dialog trees, deciding if actions trouble him or if he will respond defensively with militaristic tropes of might and the shallow regrets that only those in power can proffer.

Yet it is not only the content of the game that gives this work a critical edge. First of all, the game is divided into a two-part screen to divide the attention of the player. This divide works very well to set up a dialogue between actions and consequences, between the political and the personal. The rough graphics, so unrealistic when compared to commercial games that depict war, stand in stark contrast to professional video game values and suggest that the experience might be more introspective in nature. Unlike many military games, this is a slow game, one in which not much happens except for the mundane, while the real toll of war in one distant place through remote commanding has a hollowing, sinister effect in the other “safe” place, as corresponding to the two viewing windows available to players of the game.

Thus *Unmanned* exemplifies critical play in form as well as content, asking players to think deeply about their decisions, the issue at hand, and the nature of games themselves. Criticality in *Unmanned* is fostered by the game’s theme, its storyline, its setting, and narrative premise; its game mechanics, dialogue options, and interaction roles for the player; in its rules and reward structure, as well as in its music and aesthetics. The game is able to touch on social, cultural, political, and personal themes using the intricacies of a game system.



FIGURE 20.1 Molleindustria, *Unmanned*, 2012. Screenshot. Image courtesy of Paolo Pedercini.

In the downloadable game *Mainichi* (2012), artist Mattie Brice uses an old-style role playing game aesthetic to involve the player in a “day-in-the-life” game (*Mainichi* means “everyday” in Japanese). You help the game’s protagonist—also named Mattie and looking like Mattie, with dark skin and dark hair—get ready to go out, go down the street, then meet up with one of her friends at a coffee house. You help her pick up two beverages at the virtual coffee shop, flirt with the barista, and gab with a friend. In chatting about the flirtation, the friend asks Mattie, “Does he know?” After the conversation, the day begins again, and the player can try alternatives such as not wearing makeup, or dressing casually.

If players are coming to the game without reading much about it, they will soon discern its subtext, revealed through time: players are to role-play in the shoes of Brice herself, who “wanted to communicate an experience that I couldn’t do with words alone” (Brice 2012). While in the house, Mattie has an internal dialogue aimed at cheering herself up or thoughts on getting ready to go out. The internal dialogue is another element *Mainichi* shares with *Unmanned*: rarely do mainstream games let us enter into the player’s hopes, fears, and internal mindset to this degree—especially when these thoughts also reflect on social norms.

It is entirely possible to play through the street scene, for example, with little interaction with other characters. Interacting with these other characters, though, can be disturbing, and the encounters add much to the impact of the work. We overhear a person on the street asking a friend if Mattie is a boy or a girl. A man approaches Mattie on the street and says, “What’s up pretty? Hey, I want to talk to you,” then reacts vehemently, exclaiming “You’re a man!” When Mattie later chats with her friend over coffee, she confesses, “It’s hard to feel happy sometimes.” The game’s options are limited, as are societal roles; the game sheds light on banal micro-aggressions, misunderstandings, and the daily, lived experience of difference.

Both *Unmanned* and *Mainichi* expose dominant cultural values and set up situations in which those values are conscientiously negotiated. Each of these game artworks offers players opportunities to form their own critical examinations of play.

Proposition 2: Critical Play Can Mean Toying with the Notion of Goals, Making Games with Problematic, Impossible, or Unusual Endings

The term “critical play” was a culmination of my interest in both computer games and my own work as an artist. I use play and game fundamentals in projects that range from software art, drawings, and installation, to sculpture (some of them specifically game-related), and are shown in more traditional art venues. I also run an experimental game design lab, Tiltfactor, which fosters the design of games for social impact. Important threads play out in any art, no matter what the form, and critical play is an idea that can help extend the definition of the “avant-garde” to game design. Like alternative theories of narrative texts, poetry, and film, critical play points to the ways in which some games ask much more of the viewer than others in terms of a critical dialogue and reflection. These are the games that engage with “radical” game design and involve players in new ways. Computer games are often seen as a new medium not necessarily aligned with older forms of play, but this is an oversight. Critical play readily manifests in older and current games designed by artists who intend their work to offer political or social critique in order to propose ways of understanding larger cultural issues.

In Molleindustria’s *Every Day The Same Dream* (or EDTSD) (2009) players guide a worker through his morning routine and get him to his job at an office where he sits in an Orwellian-style, replicable cubicle. A precursor to *Unmanned*, EDTSD is a point-and-click game in which players can make few decisions and have few options. They take on the role of the worker starting their day in bed, waking up and getting dressed, kissing the spouse goodbye, getting in the car, driving to work, confronting the boss about their lateness, and going home. This pattern can be played repeatedly; every day is nearly the same “dream” from beginning to end. Whenever a player chooses a slightly different option in the routine, a new “dream” day begins. Are players working toward being a new person? This is what one of the few characters in the game—the lady in the elevator—suggests. Or is it a representation of the logic of capitalism that has created the most complex form of alienation, alienation of people from their work and from each other? Other characters include a homeless man, who takes players to a quiet spot, and a cow encountered in a field. These offbeat characters not only break the monotonous pace of the game’s “bad dream” but also disrupt the expectations of those used to playing less introspective games.

While the game could do without the stereotypical 1950s gender roles as a means to suggest oppression—the protagonist’s wife is already up early in the morning, cooking him breakfast—the lack of player choice or agency in conducting the virtual life effectively functions as a critique of the characters’ lives and a postmodern condition in which labor is both separated from life experience and valued only in particularly abstract and absurd ways. The game is in many ways the antithesis of *The Sims*, the popular “dollhouse” game released in 2000. In EDTSD the home gradually empties, the acquisition of material becomes meaningless, and work is

pointless. The work process within the game is an exploration of the bleakness and alienation of daily life in a world with empty, unconnected labor and long days.

Artists frequently strip games of their potential agency, their game-specific elements: no rules, no player actions, no risks, no rewards, no bonuses or deaths. A key feature of games is that they are bound by their own rule sets, and therefore invite regulation, supervision, and of course, subversion. To scholars such as Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), play is culturally associated, at least in part, with transgressive and subversive actions. Thus play itself could be seen as a type of subversion, one that looks at expectations and weaves in a social critique inherent to critical play. A good example of this approach might be the ultimate subversion of a game as offered in Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002): Arcangel removed all of the game-like elements from a Super Mario Brothers Nintendo cartridge, and stripped it to its barest, unplayable essence.

Much like abstract art in which every detail has been removed to get to the heart of image making, Arcangel's clouds roll by infinitely through an empty sky. *Super Mario Clouds*, like many other works of game art, demonstrates that artists' games are not always playable and that this unplayability is a very intentional decision. Unplayable games provide rule frameworks for thinking or, as Felix Guattari might say, "devices for producing subjectivity" (Guattari 1995). It is in this context that themes similar to those addressed in EDTSD can be found in my own work, but in the form of a video installation featuring an ongoing game scenario. *[perfect.city]* (2009) is a game-based exploration of the South Korean city of Songdo, a planned international metropolis developed by corporations, specifically Gale International, with a technological infrastructure by technology companies. Songdo is designed to be perfect: plans call for the elimination of social ills, care-free living, and happiness for all citizens—in fact, plans in the form of 3D building models were input into Google Earth before the city was even built. In my project I first explored this "virtual" city and then modeled what this "perfect city" might be like for people inhabiting it. To do this I took the models for the city, translated them into buildings in the popular computer game *The Sims 2*, and then populated this city with virtual inhabitants with their own personalities and characteristics. My virtual *[perfect.city]* became functional before New Songdo was actually built.

During the construction of the actual Songdo city atop a giant landfill south of Seoul, ubiquitous technology was considered a "feature" of the planned infrastructure. Since then, concerns about an all-knowing, "Big Brother style" technological infrastructure have increasingly been raised. As a corporate venture, public space in New Songdo will be privatized. What effect will this have on people's private lives? "We will build in all this functionality," answers Catherine Maras, Microsoft's Director of Worldwide E-Government who is involved in the Songdo project, "Really it's opt-in or opt-out. Whatever the citizens want to make their lives easier" (Duffin 2008).

[perfect.city] is shown as a two-channel video installation consisting of a large double-sided projection screen. One side of the screen alternates between live-action footage of the artist recreating the design process of the city, scrubbing backwards and forwards through time, mixed with a time-lapse recording of the planning and construction of the virtual city. This video component mimics a documentary-style look at "the making of" New Songdo. The opposite screen shows the slow motion city in action as developed in *The Sims 2*. The people inhabiting the environment are a population wandering aimlessly to and from virtual jobs, or sitting on park benches,

purposeless. All are well dressed; all are clean and tidy. They walk amid a bland and featureless urban streetscape. This future city is unattached to history, and the somnambulist attributes of the pedestrians point to the weary, stale, and unprofitable experience of techno-utopianism. The featureless city streets depicted call into question the all too brief period and limited input from non-corporate entities devoted to planning the city.

[perfect.city] explores the use of technology in everyday settings and the ways in which it both reflects and creates phenomenological experiences. These experiences are interdependent, symbiotic, and create meaning in a mutual fashion. By embodying and depicting the role of “planner and developer” in *[perfect.city]*, I perform the process of creating utopic visions in which dreams pass into action and back into dreams. While these cycles are complex, the work deliberately minimizes the aesthetics of the video; I hack the city together from the banal position of my desk. The resulting video created from the process reveals the ambiguity of bleakness and beauty; this happens on the programming side, through the construction of boring behaviors, and in the image, derived from the real 3D models upon which such “utopia” was built.

Artists have been using play in subversive and disturbing ways, making impossible and grotesque objects or nonsensical game kits whose rules are enticingly unresolvable in the conventional sense of traditional games, where winners, losers, player roles, and game goals are clearly articulated. In *Waco: Resurrection* (2004) by the artist team C-Level, players must enter the mind of US Seventh-Day Adventist “Branch Davidian” cult leader David Koresh who has been resurrected in the game. Koresh became notorious not only for his cult activities but for the 51-day standoff with federal authorities at his compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993. The standoff culminated in a massive shootout, and left seventy-six people dead in a great fire. Koresh himself was killed. While engaging with the game, players wear the “head” of Koresh, a headset and mask of his face that has a voice-activated control mechanism and built-in speakers blasting messages of government agents, religious readings, and much battle noise to provide an immersive, chaotic experience for players (Figure 20.2).

By wearing the “head” of Koresh, players adopt his appearance and his subjective point of view. In the game, each player appears as Koresh—each character being identical but surrounded by a differently colored “aura.” The mission is to stay alive as long as possible, as all players control their Koresh character to run, shot, jump, and hide. Players can also energize themselves by accessing one of the different types of Bibles falling from the sky; each contains a specific phrase that will provide special power. Players’ utterance of the Bible phrase is picked up by the voice recognition hardware in the Koresh headset and raises their respective aura; as players compete with each other, they use their voice-activated controls to shout “messianic messages” in order to excel in the game. As they raise their aura, they gain more followers. The Koresh who collects the most converts until the time of death wins the game (Stern 2003).

It is significant that *Waco: Resurrection* was created on the 10th anniversary of the real-life events in Texas and functions as an intentional commentary on “holy wars.” The work can be read as a critique of the US military invasion of the Middle East. The artists emphasize the documentary elements of the game and its attention to historic detail, but the work’s real innovations are the ways in which players critically examine the cycle of religious leadership and belief and in which war is tied into the artists’ critique. The game is networked in the sense that multiple players in one



FIGURE 20.2 Eddo Stern, Peter Brinson, Brody Condon, Michael Wilson, Mark Allen, Jessica Hutchins (C-Level), *Waco Resurrection*, 2004. Installation shot. Image courtesy of Eddo Stern.

game world strive to gather followers, but it also alludes to the networks of power, radicalism, and violence inherent in both politics and religion. Although the game might look as if it glamorizes aggression, violence and narcissism in the game are treated very knowingly and critically. In both its gameplay and themes, *Waco Resurrection* is indeed a critical game. It is coincidental that it prophetically anticipates behavior, such as the gathering of “followers,” that would become common practice on social networks a decade later.

Every Day the Same Dream, *Super Mario Clouds*, [*perfect.city*], and *Waco Resurrection* each represent vastly different “genres” of digital gameplay, yet they all complicate the idea of game goals. Each of these critical games presents players with problematic, impossible, or unusual endings and thus helps them to not only reconsider each of the game situations presented but to also reflect on the meaning and strategies of games themselves.

Proposition 3: Criticality Can Lead to Extreme New Kinds of Play, and Make Familiar Types of Play Unfamiliar

People across every social category are exposed to games in some form on a daily basis, and as many as 97% of US youth play games, half of them for an hour or more daily (Lenhart et al. 2008). With the increasing accessibility of mobile technology (such as smartphones and tablets), these numbers only continue to rise. The use rates of electronic media and entertainment are particularly high among teenagers and young adults. On any given day, 30% of all kids aged 2–18 will play a video game; those who do spend an average of just over an hour playing (Rideout, Foehr, and

Roberts 2010). Games have been recognized as artworks not only for their aesthetics but also for their function as sites for commentary and critical perspectives. Like other digital art forms, game-based works have increasingly become provocative and introspective, as well as playful. And like other forms of art, games reflect the culture of their creation. Games can offer a range of interactions, but these often become predictable variations that reach wide audiences due to the mass production of game consoles and controllers. One novel take on game interactions is pursued in the artwork *PainStation* (2001) developed by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff, two Cologne-based media artists operating as the collective *//////////fur/////*. The custom-made, two-player *PainStation* unit houses game controls and a monitor on which to play. Two people play the classic arcade game *Pong*, against each other, placing their hands on “Pain Execution Units” that offer feedback to them. Players place their hands across two electrodes: the heel of the palm on one, a fingertip on the other. In order to win *PainStation*, players will have to endure pain: if the player misses the ball, for example, the slip causes heat, lashes, or electric shocks depending on the Pain Inflictor Symbol indicator. Players have to endure heat and electric shocks to play. (In subsequent versions of the unit, an “I agree” consent button was implemented into the unit, and the whip that beats the players’ hands could be exchanged for a variety of materials and adjustable pain levels.)

Regardless of the score achieved in the game, the first person to remove his or her hand from the pain device loses. Unlike other computer-mediated games that detach players from the embodied experience of play via small game controllers, *PainStation* brings the body back into play with a visceral vengeance. The game raises the stakes for the future of play. While it may feel like a whimsical, humorous introduction of embodiment back into game play, the unit can truly inflict harm, and this is precisely the tension that the work introduces. Players work together and receive the same punishment, creating a community of endurance and, if you are playing against a friend, empathy. But the work does “hurt,” and for some people it isn’t just a game but an endurance test or dangerous rite of passage. Thus the strange dichotomy between play and not-play moves center stage. This is play both familiar and unfamiliar, play that is dangerous and disturbing—*PainStation* allows players to be critical of the effects of games and the strange nature of embodiment while playing.

Another example of a game that reflects on game mechanics and strategies themselves is *Brainball* (1999), which critiques the fast-paced nature of computer games and the assumed concept of competition in a game. In *Brainball*, players compete to relax. Two people sit at a table, don electroencephalogram monitoring bands on their heads, and play to move a ball forward through brain activity. The players’ brainwaves are shown on a screen so the public can watch. The brainwaves that move the ball forward are alpha and theta waves, which are generated by relaxing, and the more relaxed player will therefore score a goal over the opponent.

Since its creation by Magnus Jonsson at Sweden’s Interactive Institute in 1999, *Brainball* has become a classic work that reverses gaming conventions and reveals new ways in which we might play. It has shown around the world and has been updated and released as an app. As *Brainball* shows, artists working with games build systems that ask questions and often focus the game mechanics on the very processes that make games playful, interesting, and fun. Whether working in analog or digital media, game artists transcend technologies and engage with rule systems that enable the discovery of key ideas. Game artists express themselves

through rules, end states, game goals, actions in a game, game narratives, and other elements, employing a range of strategies for criticality.

A locative media art game that reflects upon ubiquitous technology, games, intimacy, and the connection between virtual and physical space is Blast Theory's *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), which launched at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. In URAAY, participants—divided into Street Players and Online Players—collaborate to find the character embodying “Uncle Roy” in a city within 60 minutes. Street Players find themselves wandering around the city with handheld devices and custom software showing the location of online players. They declare their position in the software on a map, and are given an online avatar so that Online Players can also see them. Online Players can then send private messages to the Street Players to help them find their way.

Directions from Uncle Roy lead Street Players to a specific office where they ring a buzzer and enter. Online Players enter a virtual office and are invited to join the Street Players by watching them in the office via web cam after answering a set of questions. They are confronted with the scenario, “Somewhere in the city there is a stranger who is also answering these questions. Are you willing to make a commitment to that person that you will be available for them if they have a crisis? The commitment will last for 12 months and, in return, they will commit to you for the same period.” If Online Players agree, they have to enter their physical home address and can then “enter” the physical office (Blast Theory 2003). Street Players find a postcard in the office with the question, “When can you begin to trust a stranger?” and are asked to take it with them. Further commands lead the Street Player into the back of a limousine waiting outside the office, in which someone asks them the same questions the Online Player has answered including the one for a 12-month commitment to the other player. If Street Players agree, they are paired with an Online Player and mail the postcard to an Online Player's address while returning the game equipment to the kick-off point. In URAAY, players are asked to reflect on surveillance culture, the anonymity of networked connections, as well as the temporality of games by bringing these issues to the forefront during play. The game ultimately is exploring ethical questions; instead of establishing a simple, temporary networked interaction that can be disregarded, will players make a one-year commitment resulting from that interaction? What are the ethical boundaries of online surveillance and friendship?

As a final example of the third proposition for critical play, I would like to use my project [*giantJoystick*] (2006), an interactive sculpture consisting of an oversized game controller modeled after the Atari 2600 joystick. In this case, the change in scale occurring with [*giantJoystick*] creates new kinds of play: the joystick is so large that players need to collaborate in order to use it. In addition, the work makes familiar types of play unfamiliar: most game players know how to use a joystick very well, but when faced with one that is larger than one's body, they often must relearn how to engage. The shift in scale acts as a dynamic and subtle reminder of players' own embodiment and their connection to others through play.

In each of these very different types of works—*PainStation*, *Brainball*, *Uncle Roy All Around You*, and [*giantJoystick*]*—criticality of mechanisms, strategies, and conventions creates new types of play. Players are “injured” by engaging with a mere computer game. They have to try to relax instead of summoning their competitive urges and “tensing up” to play. They are asked to trust others in the real world during and after playing together. They have to use their bodies and work together to play a game with*

which they might otherwise engage in an unconsciously instinctive way. In each of these situations, the player is being asked to rethink their play experience and find new meaning in the changes in interaction and experience that critical play provides.

The Future of Critical Play

Games are indeed their own unique art form, but not all games are critical. Indeed, there are many games, like many plays and films, that just wish to “be games.” In this essay, however, there are benefits and strengths to playing critically, and creating critical games. Each of the propositions discussed in this essay suggest ways in which artists working with games can foster criticality. Proposition 1 reveals that artists’ games nurture an environment where players can reflect upon dominant cultural values and see everyday assumptions in a new light. Proposition 2 upsets what players might know or experience as a game in the first place, shifting rules for play and impossible or unusual endings. Such repositioning of games might be novel or even shocking to those used to typical types of games, but gradually the definitions for games are expanding and shifting as the medium attracts an increasing number of eclectic makers and thinkers. Proposition 3 uncovers the ways in which a critical stance through play can lead to novel play forms. In a time where games have permeated the mainstream on an international level, criticality play forms a significant contribution to conceptual art. Given the pervasiveness of play and the successes of games as a commercial media form, a critical stance in play provides a fresh reading for what is considered to be a normal way of interacting in games. Indeed, new kinds of games can ask us to think in new ways. What are the big-picture implications for critical play? At its best, it can give us a lens through which we engage with the world, and not just the artworld, but the world of politics, the military, health care, education, and psychology. “What must be changed is the game itself, not the pieces,” noted one of the key founders of surrealism, André Breton (1953, 76). Critical play may have emerged from the arts, but it need not stop within the arts. Such thinking is emerging among designers and gamers who are experiencing these ideas for the first time and responding through games. As we have seen, the critical games discussed here are emerging from social groups, indie gamers, activists, and youth asking questions with the medium of their time. Critical games provide avenues in which artists’ social interventions can move beyond rhetoric and be effective in engaging with, and shaping solutions to, pressing social issues.

Note

- 1 The Oxford English Dictionary offers eight meanings for the adjective *critical*: (1) fault-finding; (2) exercising careful judgment and prone to punctuality or exactness; (3) occupied with the act of criticism, being related to criticism or critical theory; (4) the crisis or tipping point of a disease or disaster; (5) that which constitutes a crisis related to the issue, such as a critical path or involving fear or suspense on an uncertain grave issue; (6) crucial and decisive; (7) a point at which a condition passes over into another condition or a reactor maintains a chain reaction; and (8) that which is distinguished by slight or difficult to determine differences (“critical, adj.” OED 2013).

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