Ludic mutation: the player’s power to change the game
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Introduction: The Player’s Power to Change the Game

In 1957 the Situationists penned a hopeful manifesto calling upon the revolutionary potential of play, for “the invention of games of an essentially new type” (Debord, “Report”). The brief descriptions of these early Situationist capers and “derives” that were actually played, not just theorized, recount exploring underground tunnel systems, occupations of Parisian railway stations, and spontaneous urban mappings (Debord, “Theory of the Derive”). During the Situationists’ time, the “objet de resistance” of such critical play was the utilitarian, mercantile, everyday circulation of the city. Debord writes, “The situationist game is distinguished from the classic notion of games by its radical negation of the element of competition and of separation from everyday life. On the other hand, it is not distinct from a moral choice, since it implies taking a stand in favor of what will bring about the future reign of freedom and play” (“Report”).

Half a century later, play does not seem to have realized its revolutionary potential entirely the way these young artists, architects and writers envisioned. And yet games may indeed have infiltrated everyday life only too well. McKenzie Wark describes an ominous growth of “gamespace,” an invasive agonistic, speculative, abstract game logic taking hold in global finance, education, narrative media, and other spheres once considered outside the game. He writes, “Play becomes everything to which it was once opposed. It is work, it is serious, it is morality, it is necessity” (Wark). “Gamification,” a term that floats around software, game industry and pedagogic circles, refers to the addition of gamic features to everyday activities that were once outside the game, like an electronic list of daily tasks on the mobile phone that rewards “the player” each time an errand is completed or a grocery item is purchased. Digitized student exams provide instant positive or negative feedback on the player’s answers.
Of weightier consequence, are the so-called “serious games” that train the soldier to conduct a flanking operation in the close quarters of the urban terrain of Mogadishu or Washington D.C., familiarizing soldier-players with M.O.U.T., “Military Operations in Urban Terrain.” These virtual exercises prepare soldiers for life-sustaining refugee rescue operations and the killing of insurgents at sites of urban unrest. For instance, at the 2008 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge, three of four winners were military games on the topics of “geo-location, military procedures of the Canadian army, and medical treatment of burn victims” (Serious Games Challenge). The ludic operations of the “asymmetric” War on Terror, the war of a few among the many, thus find their way into the heart of civilian population centres; in the imagination and on the ground.¹ Likewise of greater consequence, is the game’s hold over players who “live their lives” in a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). While seated at computers located in Chinese “goldfarm” sweatshops, player-labourers earn valuable virtual gold in gamic economies by day. By night, they play these same games “for fun” (Dibbell).²

Fig. 1. Washington D.C. Level; *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009); Game Screenshot.
Common to these varied accounts of playing the game, is the broader relevance of game beyond that of entertainment. Wark’s “gamespace” spreads into the world, into work, the city, into art, and into war. Frequently cited among game scholars is Johan Huizinga’s notion of “the magic circle,” a separate ritual-like sphere where voluntary play unfolds, either behind an imaginary border or within a literal barrier like the fence that separates the playground from the city and the school (10). Less widely referenced from his foundational treatise on play, *Homo Ludens*, are Huizinga’s investigations into the diverse roots of play in ancient culture (32). Huizinga’s search for the elements of play in funerary rites, deadly Sanskrit riddles and prejuridicial Arabian contests presupposes that before modernity relegated play to the magic circle, play was at loose amidst culture, confusing the rational boundaries of life’s necessary activities with the ridiculous, competitive, and flighty contests of the ludic (108). As gamification and serious games attest to, in the early 21st century, we may again be witness to a return to a similar “savage” confluence of the game with everyday life, a blurring of the boundaries of the magic circle.

Still, these allegations of the game overflowing into life may seem overblown, analogous to the media’s sensational critique of the effect of violent games on unbalanced youth. In response to such reception criticism, and its implicit or explicit call for censorship, many in the game industry and in game studies have tactically adopted a stance that clearly separates the game as a type of fiction, like literature or filmmaking, from the world. Although my project will make a case for greater scrutiny of games, an entertaining cultural region that is often not taken seriously enough (even as fiction) ultimately, whether or not games are becoming a dominant paradigm of contemporary life around the globe, is a bigger question that I leave to Wark and others in diverse disciplines from philosophy to the social sciences. The sceptical reader may at least accept the more modest claim that much is to be learned of the power relations of a culture and its time through its games. In a somewhat
more visible strand of historical game scholarship (for much of such history is buried in obscurity), games provide insight into the strategies of the war of the moment. For instance, an ancient form of Sanskrit chess played with warrior-elephant and chariot pieces speaks of a time when the site of the battle was an empty field. Many of today’s battle games, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, favour the city as the setting for battle.

1. THE GAME VS. THE PLAYER

If we can at least agree that we observe a closer relation between games and activism, between games and war, between games and the city, in other words, an infiltration of games into certain regions of the world, we would do well to analyse the power of the game. Rather than a revolutionary, freeing act of resistance as imagined by the Parisian Situationists, often the game imposes a kind of subjectification. To a certain extent, whatever kind of game it is, whether a military-themed First Person Shooter game, an online role playing game hinging on the exchange of digital artefacts, or even just an entertaining “casual game” challenge of throwing cartoon birds with little correlation to worldly concerns, the game’s rule space takes over the player. As phenomenologist philosopher Hans George Gadamer writes of the player’s aesthetic union with a game: “Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play” (102). The game’s timed procedures demand reflexive acts from the player. The player engages with the game’s pre-programmed interactions, losing minutes and hours to the fascination of overcoming the challenge, and then ascends to the next, incrementally more difficultly-scaled challenge. Claus Pias compares the player’s race against the game’s digital clock in single-player action computer games to timed efficiency tests conducted on early 20th century factory workers, writing: “The similarity [between games and work] lies in that all work can be optimized following the rules of space and time studies” (43). The player submits to the game’s regime.
And yet players also design and play their own games, thereby seizing back some of that which was lost to the game. My underlying research question over the course of the chapters of this dissertation concerns this power grab from the game. I understand these acts as player-driven transformation of an existing game into another, as a transformative process I will refer to as ludic mutation. In what now reads as a prescient forecast of the mutable power of play, within a series of letters written to Kant, poet Friedrich Schiller invokes a dynamic “play drive” as the aesthetic force behind art making, an ongoing tension between an abstract “formal impulse” and a “material impulse” (65). Schiller questions, “But why call it a mere game, when we consider that in every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man complete and displays at once his twofold nature” (79)? The player’s power lies in creation, change, and modification of the game. The remaker of games sees the world not as a given, fixed place composed of static objects, but as play material, to be tweaked, hacked, altered, and reconfigured. Such ludic mutation may be of short duration, a momentary intervention in the city’s everyday life or a brief displacement of the dominant game’s normal play procedures with a different set of rules—and yet even such temporary diversions may be of consequence. Also, I will keep in mind that such tactic interventions are not intrinsically resistant, for a new game can service powerful vested interests, as when the War on Terror occupies the city via games.

Over the course of this writing, I investigate these player-driven changes to the game at varied scales and points of intervention, across gaming culture, in unique online communities of players, among artists, activists, and situated within the city—both in the digital game city and the augmented city. Players modify and evolve game structures and genres, taking back the authorial reins of game-making from a risk-averse commercial game industry. Artists conduct chaotic aesthetic hacks of the game’s programmatic engine, reducing military-themed shooters and car races to abstract surges of colour and noise.
Gamemakers with critical agendas simulate the world’s problems in miniature toy worlds. Activist players carry out campaigns of ludic social resistance on the digital streets and public arenas of online game cities. And children of the future play games of mixed reality within the everyday urban habitat.

2. CHAPTERS

The first and second chapters may be of greater interest to play theorists and cultural researchers concerned with the open evolution of digital game culture. I discuss mutable play forms that support gender and identity experimentation, as well as variant styles of play that verge on art making. Game structures and game changing methods are contrasted and evaluated in relation to their potential for empowering the player and facilitating liberatory ludic mutation. In Chapter One, in its purest, lightest expression, ludic mutation consists of player-driven, creative cultural change, unhindered by market pressure or societal strictures. I discover an open-ended manifestation of such ludic mutation in an unusual, free to make and play, 1990’s adult Internet game known as “KiSS.” Artist-players of KiSS participated in lightly unfolding gender and identity play with digital doll-like avatars that were passed around via the Internet.

Although dolls are usually associated with the traditional domestic sphere of women and children, these digital dolls broke from this domestic setting when they were appropriated by players of diverse genders of more mature inclinations—for adult KiSS players were often more interested in undressing, than dressing up the doll. Although this chapter’s emphasis is not on the “real life” identities of these international players, it is interesting to note that these doll games appear to be a rare blossoming of erotica created by a substantial percentage of women player-gamemakers.
The KiSS doll-character changes its attire and even body with toy-like variability over the ten sequential frames of the game, arriving at a variant ending each time it is played. I refer to such changeable games that lack predetermined goals, but nevertheless conform to a chain-like, iterative structure, as *unfolding games*. In this first chapter I venture an analogy between the play acts of the unfolding game to the open-ended, aesthetic political actions of political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s “Space of Appearance” (206). Modern notions of politics, such as that of a representative democracy, appear to have little to do with playing such games. Yet Arendt’s understanding of the individually disclosive, performative actions undertaken within her “Space of Appearance,” modelled on the polis of the ancient Greek city-state, is a distinctly aesthetic formulation of political exercise that in many ways fits the unfolding game (198).

In Chapter Two, I analyze players’ appropriation and modification of commercial computer games. Contingents of players and amateur gamemakers known as “modders” actively produce their own variations of commercial games. A game modification, or “mod,” might be a relatively minor change to the game, for instance an early 1990’s hack of a female character into the male only turf of the militant First Person Shooter genre. Or a mod might be an entirely new game with a new architectural level, thematic setting, and play style, referred to among players as a “Total Conversion.” Some mods have outlived and eclipsed the popularity of the original commercial game, such as the *Defense of the Ancients (DoTA)* mod of Blizzard’s *Warcraft III* (2002), a strategy game of territorial invasions.

Modding entails a relation between two distinct spheres of cultural production, on the one side professional and proprietary, and on the other volunteered and nonproprietary, and this relation is imbued with certain inequalities and tensions. In this second chapter I draw on Michel Serres’ multivalent figure of *the Parasite* as a key to understanding these relations,
approaching modding as a kind of parasitism or borrowing from a wealthier commercial “host” (5). In addition to appropriation, the parasite also makes disruptive noise in the game system. Artist-made mods thrive on the chaotic pleasure in dismantling industrial game engines, reducing a photo-realistic First Person Shooter game of militant agon to abstract fields of pixelated color and fragments.

And yet I also question who is the greater parasite in such cases—is it the player who hacks the commercial game, or is it the commercial game developer who profits off the free voluntary labor of player-modders? Critics of such relations contend that such voluntary labor constitutes an easily exploitable “outside” that Information Age industries deliberately cultivate (Terranova 79). At other times, instead of the parasitism or exploitation of a host, modding seems more a matter of mutually beneficial, symbiotic evolution. Players leave their mark through customizations and other changes and subsequently the game industry incorporates some of these player innovations. Thus commercial games evolve in concert with the contributions of players, absorbing player-driven changes on certain fronts. And yet over the course of such “evolutionary” productions and iterations, when does the computer game industry choose to ignore the contributions of modders? In this chapter I identify those moments when the modder’s symbiotic “gifts” to gaming culture are too feminine, homoerotic, or otherwise different in play style to cross over into the industry.

The third chapter, “Clockwork Game Worlds” explores operational concerns, game design issues, and existential quandaries relevant to activist games. Rather than underscoring the player’s power, this chapter emphasizes the power of the game over the player. In a genre of serious games I label “activist simulation games,” gamemakers model the operation of a harmful process in the miniature toy world of the game. For instance, Gonzalo Frasca simulates a satellite powered airstriker for eliminating minute cartoonish Middle-Eastern city
dwellers at a distance. And in bold and cheerful colours, Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria simulates the overseeing of environmentally destructive farming, cattle slaughter, and fast-food hamburger production. And yet I argue that although such activist games attempt to cast a dynamic operation such as war or destructive business practices in a critical light, the player may easily fall under the enchantment of the game.

To better understand why many activist games fail to instigate the player, in this chapter I draw on a tradition of philosophical thinking from outside the customary realm of game studies. Functional “clockwork” operations are easily normalized within what Martin Heidegger refers to as “everyday sight,” a common-sense view on the workings of the world (107). Losing oneself to the game through interaction with the mechanical routines of the game offers the player an all too welcome reprieve from what Heidegger’s former student Gadamer refers to as the “strain of existence” (105). Paradoxically, the only way for an activist gamemaker to awaken a player’s deeper reflective faculties and spur them into action may be to program the game to interrupt and sabotage itself, to become a broken toy. In this chapter, the importance of when the game breaks down becomes crucial.5

Of potential interest to activist artists, urbanists, and to political and military theorists, in the last chapters, Chapters Four and Five, I stage an analysis of both gamic occupations and resistant ludic campaigns within the city. Games and toys are evaluated for both their resistant or libratory promise, as well as placed within the context of militarization and informatic population control. In the fourth chapter, “City as Military Playground: Contested Terrain,” I compare an interventionist approach to playing the city among artists to a curiously parallel military approach to ludic occupation of urban terrain. Drawing on theories developed outside of the humanities, I cite the military rationale behind asymmetrical warfare, as well as referencing “post-mortem” level design reflections from the computer
game industry, unravelling what adds up to a gamic militarization of civilian population centres. I then turn my attention to the “artist’s camp,” following a thread that begins with the early formulations of Parisian Situationist artists and architects for playing the city. This interventionism is later taken up in the performative disturbances of systems orchestrated by “hacktivist” artists. I close the chapter with analysis of ludic activist affronts and protests staged on the militarized streets and public arenas of computer war games.

In the last chapter, "Toys of Biopolis," I analyse fictional, not actual, mixed reality games played across the episodes of Mitsuo Iso’s Japanimation television series *Dennou Coil*. The populace of Iso’s science fictionnal Daikoku City have become the subject of a citywide experiment with mobile, mixed reality gadgets that project data and artificial life forms into the everyday urban habitat. The series hypotheses the societal effects of mixed reality technology that some predict as the next phase of digitalization, extrapolating from current mobile smart-phone usage. In such an augmented “control society,” a fluid web of informatic control is imposed upon Daikoku City’s citizenry via the glasses and the wireless infrastructure that electronically tags every place, object, and person on the municipal grid (Deleuze).

In this final chapter I draw upon theorizations of the biopolitical to account for an erasure of political space and everyday freedoms in Iso’s vision of a near future city. I then explore how the informatic hold that the city has over its inhabitants, and the biopolitical logic legitimizing this control, can be broken and reprogrammed with toy-like gadgets. If the apparatus can be diverted from its control function through play, it may be that a vestigial “polis” lives on in the child characters of this future Asian biocontrol city, for they have been equipped with the power of playing the city.
From the adult unfolding games of dolls, to avid player modding, to ludic activist campaigns on digital streets and hard pavement, to the hypothetical “futureware” mixed reality toys and games of children, this thesis will conduct an investigation into the potential for channelling the power of games back through the players’ hands. Other important examples of remaking the game supersede the space of this writing, and many ephemeral acts of ludic mutation have yet to be visibly documented. My framing of these practices is intended to illuminate the power of the game over the player, as well as to offer hope of changing the game.

Notes

1 Asymmetric warfare, discussed in Chapter Four, refers to a disproportionately small amount of either terrorists or soldiers in comparison to a larger civilian population.

2 In such gold farms we also find evidence of interesting distinctions between regional and global implementation of the game that merit further exploration. I begin to articulate a Japanese and Asian situated perspective on mixed reality games in the last chapter. A sixth final chapter on “Southern” approaches to ludic mutation, where I intended to analyse artist and design collectives in Latin America and Southeast Asia, was eliminated due to this project’s current length and scope.

3 Casual games are computer games of short duration and demand less skill at the outset than more “hard core” game genres. Casual games are often played on mobile phones and tablets, and the settings tend to be abstract or cartoonish, supposedly appealing more to women, children and the elderly.

4 “Augmented Reality” or “mixed reality” refers to the mingling of informatic data with geographic locations, such as a mobile phone camera application that when pointed at a building, overlays icons of businesses contained in the building onto the phone’s camera view.

5 Such a negative strike against the game’s power may take a polemical turn, when a “no play imperative,” an interruption pre-programmed into the game, forcefully ejects the player from the game’s enchanting spell.

6 Post-mortems are written subjective accounts of the development process of a game that are made public only after the commercial release of a game to market.