Ludic mutation: the player’s power to change the game

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Chapter Three: Clockwork Worlds: Activist Games, 
Harrowing Missions, and Broken Toys

Toy trains circle through a 1:25 scale model of traditional Dutch buildings and landmarks in the miniature city of Madurodam. Miniature cargo ships float along canals and toy delivery trucks loop around a peripheral freeway. These vehicle circulations follow a reliable daily schedule ever since the tourist attraction was constructed in 1952 as a memorial to George Maduro, a young Jewish member of the Dutch Nazi resistance. On travel blogs, visitors remark on the “punctuality” of the miniature city’s transportation, recalling their childhood fascination with the “moving parts” of Madurodam’s toy vehicles. Despite the vacant artificiality of the setting, the frozen-in-place postures of Madurodam’s doll-citizens, and the peculiar conglomeration of national landmarks in one Disney-like city, young and old delight in the liveliness of the toy city.¹

With similar interlocking, repetitious movements, like the hypnotic circuitous loops of a model train set, miniature computer game worlds draw the player into convincing abstractions of everyday operations. The hum of movement within a computer game, the automated circlings of artificially alive “non-player” characters, the scheduled passages of toy-like trains and vehicles and the passage of sun and clouds, synchronize with outside-the-game spheres of operations, convincing the player of the parallel efficacy of the clockwork model. Bespelled by these motions, the player believes in the model regardless of whether game characters appear in photorealistic detail or are capable of a convincingly human, artificially intelligent conversation. Moving interlocking parts conform to a functional, rational diagram of a rhythmic clockwork universe where all is running as it should.

Similar to the application of simulation in the field of computer science, all manner of lively processes from the world are modelled into game worlds, from gardening to crowd
fluxuations. For instance, in the classic simulation genre game, designer Will Wright’s the *Sims* (2000), the domestic life of a suburban North American family is simulated in a dollhouse-like game where vivacious Sims people eat, walk, urinate, socialize, and speak in “Simlish,” a pseudo-language of emoticons. In this chapter I will in particular draw on a stream of game investigation conducted over the last twenty years on simulation and the “procedural” logic of games, the lively processes and movements that unfold each time a game is played. Much of this theorization comes out of a post-graduate study program directed by Janet Murray, who initially proposed that a computer game is a cultural work produced by a “procedural author” (153).

Although my argument in this chapter will be informed by the substantial inroads that these game simulation researchers like Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca have wrought theorizing the dynamic “procedural rhetoric” of games, what has been somewhat overlooked is a deeper questioning of procedurality itself (Bogost “Rhetoric of Video Games” 125). In particular, I am interested in the impact of these gamic procedures and simulations on political or social critique in so-called “serious games.” Serious games is a grab-bag appellation for diverse educational, training, and activist games which in this chapter I will primarily limit to the analysis of “activist simulation games,” games with explicit political and/or persuasive ambitions on the part of their makers. These activist gamemakers attempt to make use of mimetic algorithms in the game to present a persuasive argument in motion, to lodge an activist critique, or to open a political question. Therefore in my definition, an “activist simulation game” is both a. motivated by an activist or political intention on the part of the gamemaker, and b. attempts to harness simulation or procedurality in the game to carry the maker’s political critique or message to the player.
A definition relying partially on the author’s intention does encounter inherent contradictions, as when for example games not intended explicitly to be politically persuasive, such as entertaining war games, can easily be read as propaganda. But the desire on the part of the gamemaker to use games as a form of political argumentation, both when it succeeds and when it fails as it is countermanded by aspects of the game, is a tension that I hope to explore in this chapter. Referring to this difficulty in designing serious games Mary Flanagan writes, “These play spaces must retain all the elements that make a game enjoyable while effectively communicating their message” (249).

In an activist simulation game, a play move is not just a well-timed step and a jump but also carries great weight, for instance a member of an endangered species of Malaysian elephant attempting to reach the cover of diminishing rainforest. And yet despite this added worldly weight and consequentiality within the toy world of the game, it is often difficult to take serious games seriously, (I mean seriously). Although game makers set out to shock players with a moving diagram of harmful and tragic operations, players conversely succumb to the enchantment of lively, toy-like, mechanical processes within the miniature, abstracted clockwork game world, no matter how damaging the operations in the exterior world, regardless of how many dolphins are killed or how many tracts of the rainforest are depleted. The game asks to be played and mastered, inviting the player to enter into its cause and effect mechanical loops, regardless of the consequences—for it is only a game after all.

The toyness of the world of the game, the abstraction of the model that announces itself as game, not life, may then contribute to this nullification of the game’s critical impact. But moreover, I will argue that the operational movements running inside the game induce a complacency akin to what Martin Heidegger referred to as “everyday sight,” a way of “Being-in-the-World” already familiar to us from procedural interactions in the world outside
the game (*Being and Time* 107). So as to better understand the effect of the procedurality of the game on the player, I will therefore draw on what may seem an unlikely and acontemporaneous source from outside of game studies and computer science, and even from outside of what is often considered political or social critique.\(^5\) In *Being and Time*, his primary philosophical work devoted to forwarding a temporal, embodied phenomenological understanding of human existence, Heidegger theorized a common, everyday mode of being (ontology) and a mental framework that he understood as a submersion within the everyday circulations and procedures of the work-a-day, social world (*Being and Time* 78). This practical view on the workings of the world is what he refers to alternately as “everyday sight” and “circumspection” (*Philosophical and Political Writings* 107). A railway line transports workers from suburbs to the city, the suburban train stopping to let a passenger alight at an inner-city station, guarded by a vigilant conductor who steps in a back and forth pattern on the station platform. Such an interlocking set of functional workings, which we also see running compellingly in the toy city of Madurodam, is supplementary to Heidegger’s “Dasein in the They,” an immersed everyday orientation within the common world (*Being and Time* 167). We seldom question or “disclose” our place or the place of others in such work-a-day utilitarian operations, for to do so continuously would impede our ability to plug into the “equipmental workshops” we use to take care of daily business (*Being and Time* 105).

The dilemma that confronts the activist simulation gamemaker is that the very procedural logic of the simulation game that he or she hopes to harness for a provocative critique has a bespelling effect on the player, comparable to Heidegger’s state of fascinated absorption in the practical workings of the world (*Being and Time* 107). Examples of equipment in *Being and Time*, of clocks, hammers, planes, and needles, speak of a more rhythmic, mechanical, Industrial Age, but almost a century later, well into the Information
Age, much of our world is still composed of functional, instrumental relations, on and off the screen (*Being and Time* 99). Circuitous operationality has found yet another abode in the weightless, abstract toy workings of computer games.

And yet there are exceptions to the “rule” of the genre. In a certain type of activist game that I refer to as a *harrowing mission*, the player finds his or her character cast adrift inside the world, encompassed within a crisis. Although the player of a harrowing mission is permitted very few choices over the course of the game, (he or she can only run, hide or die), the player’s bid for survival, if well-crafted by the game designer, engenders genuine empathy for the plight and suffering of another outside the game.

Additionally, there are ways to break out of the bespelling circle of toy operationality. A rupture in the game may catapult the player outside the comforting and rewarding operational sphere of the clockwork game world and induce him or her to critical reflection, contestation, or action. I will argue that the player’s shift from fascinated immersion in moving game world operations to a disturbed confrontation with a malfunction of play mirrors Heidegger’s anxious illuminations of the operational clockwork loops of the world that might arise when a tool, like his oft invoked hammer, is broken or missing (*Being and Time* 102). A break in the smooth functionality of the game discloses its operational logic in greater “totality” (*Being and Time* 105). For Heidegger, a “clearing” of everyday sight uncovers the disquieting temporality of “the who’s” existence, as well as illuminating his possibilities (*Being and Time* 167). Yet, in the hands of the activist or political agitator, this unsettling pause or stop, this interruption of the game’s workings, can also be a moment ripe for the critical reflection and evaluation that precedes political action.
1. OVERSEERS OF TOY WORLD OPERATIONS

Let’s enter into a closer comparison of toy world operations at work in two widely-played activist simulation games. The player of Uruguayan Gonzalo Frasca’s airstrike simulator game, *September 12* (2003) assumes a “god” or “birds eye” position overlooking a Middle-Eastern city from above, similar to the perspective on Will Wright's classic *Sim City* (1989) where the player as city planner constructs and manages a city from above. In fact, many simulation games position the player as a distant overseer of automated, minutely-scaled, toy world workings.

This miniature toy world inspires magical delight in the player, stimulating a “philosophy of the imagination” as Gaston Bachelard describes it in his ruminations on doll-houses and toys in the *Poetics of Space* (149). In Bachelard, childlike wonder and giddy delight are also more rarely accompanied with a darker joy, a “philosophy of domination” surrounding the miniature: “From the top of his tower, a philosopher of domination sees the universe in miniature” (173). In his “belfry daydream,” individual lives are rendered at the scale of “flies” and greater cumulative patterns become visible from the belfry tower.

Similarly floating far above the ground plane, Michel de Certeau begins a chapter on “Walking the City” with a view from the top of the former World Trade Center in New York. The elevation of Certeau’s walker from street level to the 110th floor “transforms the world by which one was possessed into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like god” (92). Certeau’s great Eye recalls the late 1990’s practice in the game industry and among players of referring to simulation genre games with an overview perspective alternately as “god games.” In *September 12*, this powerful, omniscient perspective over the Middle-Eastern city corresponds succinctly with the United States and its allies’ capacity for warfare from above by means of remote satellite
surveillance and airstrikes. The gazer from on high exercises a mastery and control of the visual plane, while patterns and circulations become discernable to the overseeing player.

The goal at the outset of September 12, similar to many commercial war games released after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, appears to be to eliminate terrorists from the streets of a Middle Eastern city, identifiable by their gray robes and machine guns. But as the game proceeds, the player apprehends that the more frequently he launches missiles on the terrorists in the city, the more neighbouring civilians, including women and children, are converted into terrorists. Forging a rational feedback loop between the player’s actions and visible outcomes in the game environment, September 12 simulates an escalating cycle of conflict exasperated by the War on Terror. This interactive, escalation between player and game becomes a dynamic, interactive argument for “violence begets violence.” Thus, the game makes a case for peace via the interactive simulation of strife between the terrorists and the player—who is cast in the role of air force striker.

But here we may be slightly misled in applying Frasca’s own belief in the rhetorical power of simulation to the analysis of the game (“Simulation 101” 6). The cycle of violence
escalation largely becomes illuminated in a critical light because the game does not work
properly as a game—the only way to “win” the game would be to abstain from playing, from
interacting with the game! On the flip side of the “positive” simulation of a damaging
cycle of violent escalation, lies a negative argument for non-intervention, for non-
engagement, a “no play imperative” at neither war nor games. Paradoxically, can the
simulation of a harmful process only become visible (disclosed) to the player, and thereby
leveraged as critique, if the game is made unplayable? Before we return to this question, let’s
take a few moments to consider how procedurality and simulation has been understood in
game scholarship thus far.

Murray was one of the first to call attention to the procedurality of games and
electronic media. According to Murray, “Procedural authorship means writing the rules by
which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for
the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in
response to the participant's actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and
potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another”
(152). Bogost refers to the impact of such gamic procedural mechanisms on the player as
“procedural rhetoric”: “I suggest the name procedural rhetoric for the practices of using
processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and
visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively” (“Rhetoric of Video Games”
125). Similarly, according to Frasca, a game designer or “Simauthor” (simulation author)
communicates via the rules, logical processes and algorithms in the game that model the
trajectory of outside the game workings and outcomes: “Whoever designs a strike simulator
that is extremely hard to play is describing his beliefs regarding social mechanics through the
game’s rules rather than through events. [...] They are not only able to state if social change is
possible or not, but they have the chance of expressing how likely they think it may be” (“Simulation 101” 6).

The activist game maker therefore believes it is possible to harness the procedures of the game to mimic the probable outcome of a military assault, and to thereby communicate a particular belief about the working of the world to the player. Simulation games deliberately encourage the forging of correspondences from inside-the-game actions, procedures running within Johan Huizinga’s “magic circle” of play, to external spheres of action, so as to provoke a confusion that Bogost dubs as “simulation fever”: “But for the magic circle to couple with the world, it must not be hermetic; it must have a breach through which the game world and real world spill over into one another. The residue of this interaction infects both spheres, causing what I earlier called simulation fever, the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game’s unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player’s subjective understanding of that representation” (Unit Operations 136).

The simulation game’s “procedural argument” intentionally blurs the fence between game and world, but there are important differences between the operations running on either side of this fence or ludic border. Although all games have dynamic, time-based procedures, not all of these play moves make much sense outside the game—in other words, to state the rather obvious, not all games are simulation games. For example, the hopping moves of checkers do not correlate to any specific action undertaken in the world outside the game, and the falling, colourful squares of Tetris (1984) are just that, falling colourful squares. Signifying purely as play moves, actions in such abstract games procedurally advance the game forward towards a goal (or multiple goals) triggering wins and losses. By contrast, in the simulation game, actions and processes signify doubly as both gamic procedures and as metaphoric actions.
The ludic border often manifests quite literally as the edge of the game world. So in addition to the game’s rules, the shape of the environment itself, its simulated “ludaform,” sculpts the likely scope of potential actions, serving as a pre-programmed both delimiter and afforder of actions, influencing what is possible inside the game. \(^{12}\) For instance, a computer game player walks a character to the edge of the game where a virtual architectural barrier—a wall, a cliff, or a voice over command, or other programmed limitation, constrains the range of potential play action. Jasper Juul writes: “The level design of a game world can present a fictional world and determine what players can and cannot do at the same time” (163). Play over time reveals prohibitions and action possibilities initially concealed within the game world, for as Murray writes, over time the simulated “presentation of the world would make clear the limits of our powers” (178).\(^{13}\) The ludic border of the game, in whatever form it takes, as spatial virtual borders, as spoken, remembered, or written rules, gives shape to in-game actions. Thus the simulation of exterior worldly processes is superimposed on the game’s own gamic procedurality and ludaform.

And yet even if the overall effect of the mixture of both procedural spheres on the player is Bogost’s “simulation fever” that confuses the operations of reality and game, this does not mean that the player takes much critical notice of the simulated operation in activist games, as will become apparent in the following example. By way of comparison to September 12, lets now consider Molleindustria’s farcical Macdonald’s Game (2006), another widely played, free for download, activist simulation game affording the player an overview of a miniature toy world. Similar to September 12, Milanese Paulo Pedercini’s (Molleindustria) Macdonald’s Game simulates a harmful operation. Structured as a managerial simulation game, and implementing a slick graphical user interface button panel reminiscent of The Sims, the player alternates between managing four distinct production cycles: a. the overseeing of farm production, b. administering to a cattle feedlot, c. managing
a chain of hamburger-griller workers, and d. negotiating policies and marketing campaigns in “corporate headquarters.” The challenge of the game is to effectively multitask, manage, and maintain the production routines in all four areas without letting one slip. As the player’s skill improves, outcomes of actions in one sphere of operations have ramifications elsewhere in the game. For instance, if not enough cattle are raised, negative consequences arise further up the supply chain, ultimately effecting the Macdonald’s Corporation’s bottom-line.

Although *Macdonald’s Game* periodically discloses snippets of textual information about fast food industry practices, it is this simulation of lively processes that imparts a convincing overview of interlocking cycles of fast food bio-production, from deforestation to public relations campaigns.14

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Fig. 2. *Macdonald’s Game* (2006) by Molleindustria; Game Screenshot.

The movement of this lively cooperation of interlocking workings in *Macdonald’s Game* exerts the enchantment of what Chaim Gingold refers to as a “miniature garden,” a reduced, abstracted world like a Japanese garden, model train set, or a doll house. Over the course of his Master’s thesis, Gingold expands on the term he encountered in an interview
translated from Japanese with Shigero Miyamoto, the influential game designer of Nintendo computer games (“Miniature Gardens and Magic Crayons”). Gingold writes, “a garden has an inner life of its own; it is a world in flux which grows and changes. A garden’s internal behaviours, and how we understand those rules, help us to wrap our heads and hands around the garden. […] Gardens, like games, are compact, self-sustained worlds we can immerse ourselves in” (“Miniature Gardens and Magic Crayons”). The reduction in scale and in complexity in a Japanese garden, the scaling down from forest to tree, from lake to pond, serve in a game as a cognitive aid for the player’s apprehension of the systematic clockwork world, a miniature sphere of operations. Each abstracted component of the miniature world appears to be placed just where it belongs, for “nothing is missing, and nothing can be taken away” (Gingold).

Gingold’s miniature, garden-like game is a lively system. Growth follows its own animated trajectories, enhancing the magical vivacity of the toy world, but also demands that the player intervene and maintain inputs and outputs, growing soy and fattening cattle, processing them into hamburgers and selling them to customers. The player in *Macdonald’s Game* assumes the position of a great gardener, planting, producing, and pruning, nurturing and administering to the game-system. This more production-oriented, managerial role in *Macdonald’s Game* contrasts to the player’s airstrike view over the village in *September 12*. Yet in both games, the player still performs as an overseer of miniature toy world operations. The assumed goal of many such simulation games is the continued survival of the artificial system itself—the toy world’s motions should never stop.

Thus despite recurrent dips into bankruptcy, *Macdonald’s Game* operates so well as managerial training software for the maintenance of a toy-like, cheerful cow and hamburger world that the ironic subtext of unethical business practices passes by unremarked by players. When my game design students in Singapore played *Macdonald’s Game*, they seemed
largely unconcerned about the detrimental side effects of hamburger production on workers, animals, consumers, or the environment. They were willing to undertake the necessary to keep the game system alive and the Macdonald’s corporation above the bottom line, even adding diseased cows to the food chain. The motions of the toy world of Macdonald’s Game become an argument for fast food production, countermanding the subversive, critical agenda of the game maker.16

Another much earlier example of an activist simulation game that similarly fails to convey the gamemaker’s intended critique of a “harmful operation” is the American Quaker Elizabeth Maggie’s Landlord’s Game (1904). Maggie designed the board game to criticize the accumulative greed of landlords towards their tenants. But later the Landlord’s Game evolved into the game Parker Brothers trademarked and marketed as Monopoly. The enchantment of playing at simulated gamic operations such as acquiring properties ultimately subsumed Maggie’s critique of tenancy practices. Bogost’s contention that games persuade with procedural logic about “how things work,” understood in light of the pure efficacy of gamic procedurality itself, could be reworded as games persuade no matter what is working (“The Rhetoric of Videogames” 125).

In sum, simulation games persuade with operational models of how things work outside the magic circle of play, forging linkages across the ludic border between gamic operations and worldly operations. The enchantment of a game is enhanced by the interweaving of these operational algorithms into a lively abstractive whole, Gingold’s miniature. This contained, integrated, diegetic clockwork world is reduced from a greater complexity—from forest to miniature garden, from neighbourhood to dollhouse. September 12 more successfully fosters a critical withdrawal from the game’s operational sphere, a sphere that in addition to simulating war against the Middle East includes specifically gamic procedures, such as the expectation to win by eliminating toy opponents. Frasca disappoints
these aspirations in the player, puncturing the hermetic seal around the neat play mechanisms of the toy world. When the game’s equipment is thus derailed, the simulation’s logic is exposed to the light, uncovered from the enchantment of the toy world.

2. THE ENCHANTING ORDINARINESS OF TOY WORLD EQUIPMENT

The player interacts with the game via its “equipment,” through keyboard strokes, touches, buttons, and controls that are often organized into an instrumental “dashboard” at the edge of the screen. The equipment also refers, if we apply an extended Heideggerian interpretation, to the larger operations (“workshops”) that these buttons trigger or manipulate (Being and Time 100). September 12 presents the player with a weapon for targeting and shooting the terrorists; Macdonald’s Game offers the player a colourful toy like button-interface of slaughterhouse machinery to convert livestock first into hamburgers, and then a different range of equipment for converting hamburgers into dollars. In a chapter of Being and Time entitled “The Worldhood of the World,” Heidegger describes the equipment required for his everyday operational view of “Being-in-the-World”: “In our dealings we come across equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement. [...] A totality of equipment is constituted by various ways of the ‘in-order-to’, such as serviceability, conduciveness, usability, manipulability” (Being and Time 97).

These equipmental operations of what I have been referring to as the clockwork world seem to come from a realm of everyday, common-sense. Referring to the simulation of a natural cycle in a clock, Heidegger writes, “In a clock, account is taken of some definite constellation in the world system” (Philosophical and Political Writings 72), and further on he writes, “When we make use of the clock-equipment, which is proximally and inconspicuously ready-to-hand, the environing Nature is ready-to-hand along with it” (Philosophical and Political Writings 101). In other words, those earthly relations that are
simulated or brought along into equipment, such as the movement of the sun from day to night being replicated in the clock, are easily “discovered” and naturalized in the “clock-equipment.”

Equipment, or the “ready-to-hand” is easy to see, contrasting to Heidegger’s “presence-at-hand,” the term he uses to refer to the sounds and colours of perceived but not yet differentiated “reality,” such as a rumble of noise that upon reaching the ear does not quite resolve into the screech of a passing motorbike (Being and Time 228). Unlike the confusion that an intrusion of “present-at-hand” reality might occasion, the equipmental operations of the ready-to-hand world are easily apprehended, made sense of, or “discovered.” The equipment’s functionality seems obvious, running smoothly in plain sight, in the common sense realm of “the They.” Naturally, the player would want to use the available buttons to operate the machinery to farm and produce hamburgers. Simulation games thus simulate alleged processes from an outside the game sphere in plain view, invoking the everyday sight of how things work, the operations of fast food production, or of the efficient airstrike machine.

Although ready-to-hand equipment is easily discoverable, it also is in another sense hidden. The familiarity of everyday sight or circumspection, conceals “the totality” of a clockwork operation, the in-order-to relations that it is connected to, including objects and persons at a distance (Being and Time 105). Immersion in the clockwork world’s operations is a state of “concernful” absorption that is to a certain extent blind and alienated, not only to its own existence, but to the larger repercussions of the operation (Being and Time 101). The game’s movement compels the player to accept its operations as ordinary, as unquestionable cycles of everyday life, unfolding within plain view or, to be more precise in relation to simulation genre games, within the elevated plain view of the great overseer of toy world operations. The challenge that then confronts the activist game maker is that no matter
what these simulated operations are, as they run with evocative mimicry within miniature toy worlds, they acquire everyday currency and uncritical acceptance among players via the motion of their interlocking, toy-like workings.

3. PLAYER VS. GAME

But do the toy world’s mimetic procedures really subsume the player to such an extent? Is the operational functionality of the game truly so bespelling? Furthermore, an allegation could be made that Bogost’s rhetorical transmission of procedural game logic from the sender (the game maker or “Simauthor”) to receiver (the player) is limited by a communications model of sending and receiving. The player in this analysis, even while interacting with the game, becomes a passive recipient of rhetoric in motion. In his Master’s thesis titled, “The Videogames of the Oppressed,” Frasca proposes that players, not only game makers, potentially impact the ultimate rhetorical “outcome” of a game by channelling the course of play into directions unimagined by the gamemaker. Frasca calls upon Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed” as a model for how a game can depart from “Aristotelian narrative closure” (“The Videogames of the Oppressed” 7). Frasca writes “one of [Boal’s] most popular techniques, re-enacts the same play several times by allowing different audience members to get into the stage and take the protagonist’s role,” resulting in unforeseen outcomes (“The Videogames of the Oppressed” 7).

Such player-directed outcomes are also evident in variations of the Sims. Proper gameplay of the Sims would consist of following a blueprint for breeding a miniature Sims people family in a doll-like digital house. Sims people can marry, reproduce, acquire furniture, decorate, and enlarge their family’s house and income—and yet some players diverge from this “script.” Distributed through the Internet YouTube video-database, spectacular demises of Sim life are documented in a dark genre of game videos known as
“Disaster Sims.” In a chapter entitled “Playing House,” Mary Flanagan characterizes these “macabre” Sims games as the contemporary equivalent of Victorian dollhouse re-enactments of funerals and crime scenes: “Victorian practices of doll funerals have been translated to macabre Sims rituals where virtual dolls suffer, become malnourished or burned within the normative suburban environment” (58). In a Disaster Sim, the maintenance of the Sims family, of their belongings or of their home breaks down, such as in the birth of twin Sim babies in a burning kitchen. In the Sims 2 Video, Episode 6: Death, a final episode by “someone7272,” all the human Smith family burn to death in their mansion, except for two adult dogs, Lulu and Charlie, and their two surviving puppies, (evidently many of these macabre Disaster Sims makers are children). With the morbid, broken toys of “Disaster Sims,” we return via a different path, following the player’s initiative rather than the gamemaker’s, to derailed game equipment.20

On the other hand, when the toy is not broken, when the system is running without interruption, as when the player engages with the productive fast food mechanizations of Macdonald’s Game, the player remains blind to its workings even as he plugs into its persuasive everyday sight. Losing track of time, the player immerses herself in a sequence of game challenges that if designed well, alternates rewards (points, bonuses, and additional tools), with escalating peaks of difficulty, oscillating within what psychologist Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi refers to as a pleasurable “flow state” between challenge and skill (74). The flow state may be experienced while engaging in any absorbing activity like work, music-making or gameplay. Thus contrary to Frasca’s notion that the player directs the game as his interactions and decision-making alter the course of the game “script,” the player’s fascinated state of absorption suggests a loss of agency to the game.

Similarly, from the realm of philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer makes the inverse proposal that the game plays the player rather than the player the game. Gadamer, a former
student of Heidegger’s, conducted an inquiry into aesthetics and art that brought him to the phenomenology of play. Gadamer’s player gives up his will to the game while performing the reflexive moves demanded by a game: “The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence” (105). The player merges with game, entering into an ongoing interactive, reflexive feedback loop: “What happens to us in the experience of art, Gadamer suggests, is very much like what happens to us in play: we lose ourselves” (Weinsheimer 102). Unless the player is forced to reflect upon correspondences reaching beyond the game, the player’s critical and reflective capacity, political or otherwise, is easily bespelled amidst the movement of game actions. Reacting with neither doubt, nor on the contrary, belief, the player flows with the game’s operational allegations about how the world works.

Only when the model is broken, by the player or through a sabotage installed by the gamemaker, do the toy world’s algorithms and workings become visible. Heidegger writes, “When something ready-to-hand is found missing, though its everyday presence [Zugegensein] has been so obvious that we have never taken any notice of it, this makes a break in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers. Our circumspection comes up against emptiness, and now sees for the first time what the missing article was ready-to-hand with, and what it was ready-to-hand for” (Being and Time 105). Yes, the Disaster Sim is a player directed “rhetorical” outcome of the Sims but is also is a broken toy, the destruction of the original playscript of the Sims, and thereby illuminates the game’s operative agenda to breed a suburban family. Similarly, Frasca’s September 12 catapults the player outside the cosy assumptions of the clockwork game world and the comfortable correlations between rewarding player proficiency with toy weapons and “how things work.” The brokenness of September 12 manifests in that playing well delivers loss, subverting the expectation of the player to master a rewarding challenge of eliminating terrorists. In
Macdonald’s Game, on the other hand, the very operationality of the model of fast food production cycles transmitted to the player overcomes the game’s critical impact. Beautiful toys that run too well are always enchanting, no matter how ugly the outcome of their workings. The player is lost to the game.

4. HARROWING MISSIONS

In Susanna Ruiz’s Darfur of Dying (2006) the player controls a young Sudanese refugee character on a mission to forage for water for a refugee camp. The goal of reaching the well is accomplished by running and alternately hiding behind rocks in the desert each time a militia jeep passes. If the militia kill a character, (and it is inferred rape), another child or male or female adult character must undertake the mission to survive. In Darfur is Dying, unlike most computer games, regeneration of the same character is not possible, except by using up the lives of the eight characters from the camp. Once water has been foraged, the player returns to the camp, waters the garden, and mixes water with mud to form bricks for rebuilding. If water levels drop too low, someone must venture again from the relative safety of the camp to replenish at the well.

Like Macdonald’s Game, the village portion of Darfur of Dying simulates overseeing the operation of a lively system, a refugee village camp demanding continuous maintenance and upkeep labour on the part of the player. The player must monitor the water level icon for the village well and attend to the icon indicating the level of the overall health of the camp. Yet this simulation portion of the game is continually interrupted by text messages attempting to redirect the player to a charity donation site, as if to actually derive pleasure from playing the game too long, a game referencing a tragic situation suffered by real persons, would be a moral affront. Thus in the village portion of Darfur is Dying, like in September 12, the activist gamemaker attempts to catapult the player from bespellment within the game’s
clockwork world. But rather than merely articulating the logic of an anti-war stance and leaving it up to the player how this is to be acted upon (or not acted upon) outside the game, *Darfur is Dying*’s repeated interruptions attempt, somewhat irritatingly, to direct to the player to undertake a specific to action outside the game, namely to make a donation to a Sudanese refugee charity website.

In contrast to this interrupted simulation of the village camp, the first water mission portion of *Darfur is Dying* is an example of what I refer to as a harrowing mission, an addictive game challenge that generates empathy for the Sudanese refugees’ plight by depositing the player into a narrowly crafted predicament. From the great overseerer’s view of the toyworld in activist simulation games, we zoom into a more interior play position in the clockwork world inhabited by the player in a first person perspective harrowing mission game. Empathetic awareness of the dimensions of a tragically problematic situation, correspondences that echo current events, are conveyed by confronting the player with a limited set of challenging play actions, a sculpted “ethical” branch of possibilities. On the way to the well, the player must carefully time the decision of when to run and hind behind the next rock, risking being overtaken by a rampaging militia truck. Action choices consist only of running through the desert and hiding behind rocks, and thus the agency of the player...
is constrained to a limited set of timed decisions, correlated to a purported challenge faced by the inhabitants of Darfur. The gamemakers, a group of students led by Masters student Ruiz from University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts, successfully converted “stealth” style gameplay into a first person survival challenge confronted by Sudanese villagers.21

Like the harrowing mission portion of Darfur is Dying, the game Under Ash (2001), developed by Syrian studio Akfar Media, begins with a constrained course of action available to the main character. Ahmad is a young Palestinian adolescent attempting to survive in the conflicted Gaza strip. The impressively rendered, three-dimensional game launches with Ahmad attending a peaceful demonstration in a plaza in Jerusalem under attack by Israeli soldiers. His first challenge is to make his way uninjured to a mosque for shelter. Later he acquires a weapon, goes underground and joins the resistance movement. Although at the very initiation of the game Ahmad participates in a non-violent demonstration in a plaza, he quickly finds it necessary to resort to defending himself with rocks. The executive manager of Afkar Media, Radwan Kasmiya, relates that many players have been brought to tears while playing Under Ash (Sisler).
The harrowing mission’s level design, its ludaform, narrowly constrains the player’s course of action. In *Under Ash*, the walls of Jerusalem and other obstacles sculpt the path of the player’s actions within a limited range of likely variations and movements as the player gravitates towards the mission objective. Similar to the missions of solo player action games, such channelled play and narrow missions invoke a linearity of experience with sculpted
dramatic ebbs and peaks (when opponents and challenges appear), approaching the authorial predestination of narrative, while at the same time affording the player limited interactivity and an illusion of agency.  

If we can consider such narrow action channels within games ethics, they are an ethics designed to generate empathy for others facing a harrowing predicament, through a game challenge to be superseded. Freer, wider branching choices could be afforded the player than the tightly controlled channels of action through the games in *Darfur is Dying* and *Under Ash*. Yet a game of wide-ranging game choices and possible outcomes would not always reliably transport the player into a certain other’s purported position, that of the refugee of a particular war or the sufferer of an oppressive occupation at a certain time and place. Harrowing missions generate empathy for a very particular plight faced on the ground by somebody outside the game. In order to pass on this experience to the player, the harrowing mission is designed with a narrow range of player choices and possible outcomes.

From the perspective of the designer of a harrowing mission, the world’s tragedies and problems are a cornucopia of design inspiration. The game designer considers how to frame a problematic situation as a sequence of game play challenges and ultimately a suffering subject position is inscribed into the game. The player follows a preset path through a difficult and constrained situation, acquiring empathy for the sufferers of said position. Yet even though the player encounters the problem in the game, the problem is not for the player to solve nor to reflect too deeply upon. The player’s mission is to experience and survive the mission, in the hopes that this experience leaves a very particular empathetic mark even after the game.

Although the harrowing mission in-of-itself is not a “broken toy,” and in fact encloses the player quite narrowly within the game’s persuasive rhetoric, such games still counter the Western subject position usually inscribed into the action or stealth game genre, and are in
this sense a resistant form of play. Although Akbar Studio’s Syrian produced games have been exhibited and analysed as “activist games” in the West, Kasmiya explains them as entertainment media that speaks more positively to youth of their own culture than the Middle-Eastern enemies common in Western action games (Sisler).

5. BROKEN TOYS AND THE NO TOY IMPERATIVE

The operational logic of the game takes hold. A player’s action inspires a resulting reaction on the part of the game. The game, in turn, compels the player to further reflexive play moves and if the game is designed well, the player loses herself, losing even a sense of the passage of hours and days, within the game, absorbed into the game’s workings, immersed in a feedback loop, Gadamer’s aesthetic union of player and game. The player performs a role among other processes running within the clockwork world through interaction with the game machine and the management of its simulated processes. Like the imprint of a popular tune that demands to be liked through its repeated exposure to the ears, players unreflectively absorb the logic of military operations, internalize the production cycle of hamburgers, flow with the hum of tractors. How satisfying when at least the toy world is operating as it should.

In activist simulation games, primary play moves correspond to parallel, exterior to the game operations occurring across the ludic border between game and world. Critical rhetorical claims of “procedural logic” inside the toy world reference harmful occurrences in the outside world. Yet the very operationality of the game’s mechanics, the hum and whir of cause and effect and other lively automated and interactive processes potentially obscures the critical impact of such a game. The activist game must fight not only that it is after all only a fictional game, so obviously a miniature, brightly coloured toy world, devoid of painful consequentially, but also that the mechanical, instrumental actions that players commonly undertake in the game, invoke the obscuring ordinariness of everyday sight. In the rational,
operational spheres of games, as in the instrumental spheres of life, everyday sight turns away from suffering and the consequences of damaging human operations. Most feel powerless to disengage from, halt, or redirect the harmful goings-on that are naturalized in everyday sight. We flee mortality to the artificial circulations of ageless clockwork, toy worlds. In this sense, Madurodam’s endless ship and train circulations are an unusually soothing and forgetful memorial to the untimely demise of young George Maduro.

Breaking the game equipment is a resistant gesture against the game’s enchantment. A tactical recipe for the activist simulation game would consist then of two steps, first a positive, then a negative: first to constructively program a simulation of a harmful operation from the world into the game, followed up by an interruption or sabotage of the game that breaks the spell of the game’s movement, illuminating it’s operationality in a critical light. Absorption in the everyday world of “equipmental” dealings and transactions is broken at this rift of “in-order-to” relations among entities, things and persons. Through a sabotage installed by the designer, or a break initiated by the player, the player is ejected outside the comforting, interlocking operationality of the game world, the string of bonuses, rewards and addictive challenges. Induced to a discomforting re-evaluation and analysis of the games’ operational logic, the player performs a critical diagnosis of the wrongness or rightness of the broken equipment. After being subjected to such a critique, a harmful operation’s common sense, everyday claim on existence comes into dispute.

In contrast to the way the “derailed” simulation game’s representation of the world’s workings is open to dispute and critical analysis once it has been exposed to the light, the harrowing mission is an impassioned call to empathy for an enclosed, indisputable predicament. The enclosure of the toy world is leveraged to the harrowing mission’s advantage, and this very entrapment could also be read as a political and rhetorical closure around the player. But even the harrowing mission’s call for empathy has a certain subversive
disputability, if only because such games often favour an under-represented subject position counter to the implicit Western male, imperial soldier of commercial first-person stealth action games, the very genre otherwise most similar in form to the harrowing mission.

Returning to the activist simulation game, what is paradoxical with the broken toy tactic is that game and political critique remain in the last instance incompatible—only by interrupting or ejecting the player from the game, the no play imperative, is a critique illuminated and a political questioning made possible. Moreover, the intended effect of such games is not just a break in the game but also the possibility of a stop in the destructive worldly procedure that is simulated. The no play imperative extends beyond the game to the refusal to be a “player” in the harmfull processes of the world, a refusal to play at war, a refusal to play at exploitation of the environment in the productions and consumptions of fast food operations. Thus the most earnest mixture of politics and games seems to be delivered in games that do not believe in playing per se but in the impossibility to separate world and game, to separate procedurality in one realm or the other on either side of the ludic border.

The activist game attempts to catapult the player from absorption in the clockwork toy world, to a universe of politics that he or she is otherwise quite busy avoiding.

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Notes

1 On a weekday visit to Madurodam in June of 2011 the aging toy city seemed somewhat forgotten by the Dutch, although it was still attended by busloads of Indian and Chinese tourists.

2 The term “simulation” also invokes post-modern philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theories of simulation and “simulacra,” especially in reference to Disneyland and suburbia. Yet Baudrillard’s interest in simulation seems primarily bound up with describing the artificiality of a post-modern capitalist condition that has replaced authentic experience, a mourning for a loss of authenticity. Simulation in computer games, on the other hand, like in computer science, takes the artificiality of the model as a given without moral qualms—even as such models attempt to improve their fidelity to real life processes assumed to still be running outside the game.
3 The activist simulation game contrasts to another common variant of serious games where a “normal” entertaining game is interspersed with packets of “serious” or pedagogic information that the player swallows like cans of vegetables in between courses of fun.

4 Yet what is especially convenient about the bright-colored and cartoon-like toy aesthetic favored by many activist gamemakers is that this so-called “casual game” look demands considerably less time to produce than a “photorealistic” game, making independent, non-industrial games more feasible to produce.

5 Heidegger is often considered an apolitical philosopher, or judged for his Nazi era actions as a university administrator in Freiburg, and therefore might seem distant from political critique or philosophy. Even so, his deconstructive philosophical method (Abbau) was highly influential for critical theory in the latter half of the 20th century, and informed, for instance, the deconstructive methodology of Jaques Derrida. Also, Heidegger’s phenomenological framework impacted continental political philosophers like Hannah Arendt and Georgio Agamben.

6 In addition to uncannily bringing to the fore “the who’s” mortality and temporal existence, the clearing illuminates the operations of everyday life, and allows for the projection of possible future actions upon return to everyday life’s operations (Being and Time 185).

7 Here I take cues from Hannah Arendt’s adaptation of Heidegger’s critical “clearing” views of daily life at the same time as she eschewed his somewhat disparaging “philosophical” attitude towards the collective world and the “idle talk” of “the They.” In the Human Condition, Arendt instead proposes a more nuanced framework for understanding the collective world’s actions.

8 A confidential and disturbing military video recording released by the organization Wikileaks in 2011 revealed a “solar Eye” view from above of United States air force pilots targeting missiles at civilians on an Iraqi street, as if the Iraqis were characters in a computer game. The jaded ennui of the pilots is momentarily alleviated by the remote excitement of a few kills of the minute, ant-sized Iraqi citizens.

9 I will discuss entertaining war games in the following chapter at greater length.

10 Frasca seems aware of this tension—the introduction to September 12 provocates, “This is not a game, this is a simulation.”

11 And although all games are clearly not simulation games, a certain degree of simulation in the game often confuses the distinction. For instance, many computer games simulate the peripheral motions that breathe life into the game without directly impacting “core play,” such as weather fluctuations and movements of urban transportation. In his analysis of the “algorithmic culture” of games, Alexander Galloway refers to these peripheral simulations as “ambience acts” (10).
12 Operating as productive constraints, the ludic border or rule space of a game is not a mere enclosure, but is also, to borrow a design term, an affordance. Delimitations and rules not only constrain negatively but give shape to action possibilities, to possible moves.

13 Unlike the written rules read at the onset of a board game, in a computer game, the rules or action possibilities are often hidden initially from the player.

14 *Macdonald’s Game*, in addition to simulating a harmful cycle, parcels out information and factual text-bytes as do many other more educational style serious games.

15 The player performs virtually as both Arendt’s “HomoLaborius” (man the maintainer of life) and her “HomoFaber” (man the maker), attending to the economic, nurturing and administrative activities of the “world of necessity” she refers to generally as housekeeping.

16 Paolo Pedercini revealed in interview that he purposely designed the game to be impossible to win in order to discourage sustained play, yet in my observation this difficulty only spurs on skilled players to continue playing the game.

17 Heidegger’s corporal terminology of the ready-to-hand and the presence-at-hand is true to his phenomenological methodology that privileges embodied existence in the world, (and opposes metaphysics and philosophical abstractions). Worldly phenomena are filtered and perceived through hands, eyes and ears—corporal, sensory points of contact with the world.

18 This everyday view of equipment is parcel to the normative “falleness” of the They, who flee from the awareness of solitary temporal existence into the turbulence of everyday life. For Heidegger, a mass society of newspaper’s, public opinion and “idle talk” is especially a realm of the They (*Being and Time* 219).

19 Although Heidegger does point out that in modernity, technologies like the radio bring the components of the “workshop” into closer proximity (*Being and Time* 140). The workshop is a functional, dynamic relation between disparate components and places (latch, door, hallway, street) that erases the spaces inbetween these components, dividing contiguous Cartesian mathematical “space” up into disperate, singular “places.”

20 Such broken toys also recall the noisy disruption of games discussed in the previous chapter among a repertoire of approaches available to the player for modifying a game.

21 In stealth computer games like *Thief* (1998) or *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), in contrast to the typical shooter game’s more outright violent confrontations against the enemy, the player hides and sneaks through a mission.

22 A further ethical limit imposed on game play and upon its sequel, *Under Siege*, purchasable in both English and Arabic, is that the character immediately perishes if he shoots an Israeli civilian (rather than an Israeli soldier).

23 For example, in designer Peter Molyneux’ fantasy games, open-ended choices gravitate towards multiple goals, with varied outcomes. In Moleyneux’ *Black and White* (2001), the
player’s treatment of a demi-god “creature,” the choice of slaps or caresses, beating, incarceration, or flattery, ultimately tempers the creature’s resulting character and the happiness of the villagers under his dominion.