

Creating Critical Play

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In his landmark essay “Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play,” psychologist and ‘flow’ theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asked, “How is it possible for play to be both divorced from reality and yet so rife with real-life consequences?” (14). For contemporary artists and game designers, especially those wishing to design for complex, multivarious, and critical play, this observation alludes to one of the core challenges of creating games moving towards social, political, aesthetic, or educational aims. Simply phrased, designers of serious games must often ‘answer’ for the effects of their serious game on larger communities far more frequently than, say, a documentary filmmaker must justify the after-effects from a particular film expose’, or an artist making a critical painting. Designers of serious or social issues games face the additional possible appraisal of making light of the ‘real world’ issues they intend to bring into conversation. Luckily for those interested in the intersection of real world issues and play, there are significant and meaningful precedents in both theory and practice.

Artists have long taken on social themes such as war, social inequity, and political power in the form of game-related work. From Alberto Giacometti’s game board-related artworks in the 1930s to Yoko Ono’s all-white chessboard, *Play It By Trust*, in the 1970s, artists have seen games as frameworks for thinking about culture. The New Games Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s reaffirmed a repeated human belief that play is good for addressing social issues through its large scale, publically launched play events in California. These trends were reflected in theories of contemporary philosophers and writers.

Today, game designers and new media artists translate such restructured approaches to reality into palpable worlds, and render these as marvelous, addictive, spellbinding experiences. Players push at the edges of these varied playspaces, discovering their inherent principles, possibilities, and limitations. Here, I wish to briefly survey two game works – a street game and an online game-- to touch on how a critical praxis functions in the development of mechanics and gameplay. Games, both digital and analog, offer a space to explore creativity, agency, representation, and emergent behaviour with rules. They also quite literally fashion rule-space as a reality-space. How do designers use games to express ideas about crisis, power, and identification?



Figure 1: *Massively Multiplayer Soba, held in Queens New York*

In Fall of 2008, the Tiltfactor laboratory at Dartmouth College created a large scale collaborative urban game, Massively Multiplayer Soba. SOBA's first launch was as an urban, location-based game that took place in the Queens area of New York City. The game launched in New York at the Conflux psychogeography festival. SOBA invited players to "grab some friends and traverse remarkable neighborhoods in New York City.... Talk to strangers, find clues, and fetch ingredients for a giant collective noodle party!" Designed to be a team-based urban game focused on culture, food and language, the game-event enticed players to the non-tourist neighborhoods of New York, combining play with opportunities to mix with new places in the city, and ultimately take a meal in a collective dinner with local people, intentionally mixing players with non players. This design created unexpected encounters with residents while challenging concepts of culture and language through storytelling and discovery.



Figure 2: *Massively Multiplayer Soba, held in Queens New York*

The intent of Soba was to embody the human values of tolerance and diversity -- not only in the theme of the game but in the game mechanics themselves. For example, the teams of players carried clues in multiple languages which were designed to foster player interaction with non-players in the community. Points were awarded primarily based on the complexity and depth of the interaction, rather than the "scavenger hunt" style

claiming of facts, objects, or territories. The design allowed for a variety of play strategies: collaboration for those who may not be competitive, or specialisation for those who excel at particular kinds of challenges. Play was combined with the opportunities for engagement to allow for game players to mix and interact with residents in meaningful ways, while challenging preconceptions of race and language. Rather than simply using these neighborhoods as host sites in which the game takes place, we have made these communities central to the focus of SOBA, with longer interactions and storytelling exchanges with community members as the central goal of the project. Since, other iterations of SOBA have occurred in new neighborhoods and with new menus, such as SOBA Shanghai and Massively Multiplayer MuShu in Hell's Kitchen (2009).



Figure 3: *Massively Multiplayer MuShu*, held in Hell's Kitchen New York: "Joachim Serves First Mushu" 2009; photograph by Traci Lawson

Using games to explore complex ideas is a relatively new phenomenon, but this is not because games are not necessarily the right medium, or because play cannot be complex. There is simply not a great mass of games used in this way yet. One of the things that is attractive about games and play is the sense they offer for encountering something special-- games may provide a framework for a new system of thinking, or offer glimpses of divergent logic. Play, both in an open sense and within the structure of a game, can serve as a lens for creating something beautiful. In other words, games are systems for imagining what is possible. Games and play environments are particularly useful frameworks for structuring systemic and conceptual concerns due to their multifaceted and dynamic, rule-based nature.

Games, functioning as a technology for creating social relations, work to distil or abstract the everyday actions of the players into easy-to-understand instruments where context is defamiliarized just enough to allow for what Huizinga famously refers to as the magic circle. Play, then, relies on shifting realities or worldviews—transformations that transpire when one submits to chance elements such as financial success, camaraderie, or notability. The presence of multiple, simultaneous realities leads Csikszentmihalyi to the conclusion that, "what play shows over and over again is the possibility of changing goals and therefore restructuring reality" (17).

The notion of an "activist game" is developing with the emergence of games that address social issues gaining new audiences over the past decade. Contemporary game makers who are not necessarily identifying as artists have tackled social issues from poverty (*Ayiti*, Global Kids and Game Lab) to the Fast Food Industry (*McDonalds* game, Molle Industria) to terrorism (*September 12th*, Gonzalo Frasca). These games make relevant particular social issues to new audiences, and they also explore notions of agency and education.

In March of 2009, the Tiltfactor laboratory (US) released the causal game *LAYOFF*, reaching a million players within a week of the release. A look at the core mechanics of the game can reveal the transformative possibilities through 'critical' play. A darkly humorous game, players of *LAYOFF* engage with the game from the side of management—needing to cut jobs and increase workforce efficiency by matching sets of workers. Upon release of the game record numbers of workers had been laid off and financial institutions were receiving trillions of dollars to bolster the struggling economy. The changing state of economic affairs made more and more poignant the core point of *LAYOFF*.



Figure 4: Screen capture of the LAYOFF game, Tiltfactor Laboratory 2009

Games are particularly well-suited to supporting educational or activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key outcome. This is because games allow players to inhabit the roles and perspectives of other people or groups in a uniquely immersive way. In LAYOFF, players play from the side of management needing to cut jobs, and match types of workers into groups in order to decrease redundancy and increase workforce efficiency. Players eliminate many workers in a row and find that as they gradually replace the workers with less skilled or lower paid new workers, bankers and financiers take the place of the working class jobs. The financiers in the game do face layoffs, and they may be moved in order to address redundancies with other worker groups.



Figure 5: Worker characters featured in LAYOFF, Tiltfactor Laboratory 2009

LAYOFF is not intended to be an accurate model of the layoff process. It is not a simulation. Rather, LAYOFF inspires dialogue between players and tension in the values within the game. The ambiguity that LAYOFF imposes upon its players resonates with the “poetics of open work” as described by theorist Umberto Eco as a system of symbols and communication for indefinite, open, interpretive, and shifting positions. Within this sense of openness:

The work remains inexhaustible in so far as it is ‘open’, because in it an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed into question (p.28).

While Eco did not begin by formulating a theoretical framework for thinking about games, LAYOFF’s imbedded contradictions reflect the sense of ambiguity that also characterizes the themes of an “open” work. The design of the game was intended to foster, in part, a crisis of empathy as the workers are laid off during real-world economic collapse.

CONCLUSION

Csikszentmihalyi insisted that the term “play” be read as a negotiation between subjective and objective reality, but he cautioned, “reality is not an invariant external structure” (17). In this, he hinted that the whole of human experience and human values are continually in flux. In response to this potentiality, French theorist Gilles Deleuze offered a compelling argument for the importance of systems like games, noting that the desire for the ‘other’ is, in fact, a yearning for a structure that can become an “expression of a possible world: it is the expressed, grasped, as not yet existing outside of that which expresses it” (1990, 307). If games are possible worlds, the presence of many parallel realities through time for any individual leads Csikszentmihalyi to the conclusion that, “what play shows over and over again is the possibility of changing goals and therefore restructuring reality” (17). Games are reality engines, frameworks for meaning making.



Figure 6: *Massively Multiplayer Wancan*, held Shanghai China; photograph by Suyin Looui

Interestingly, this is a similar conclusion reached by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud about trends in contemporary art of social relations forming due to the intervention of an artwork. Indeed, early on in his influential treatise *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud notes, “Artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence.” Later in his text, he claims, “Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes.” Through these observations and the preceding game works, we can easily see that these works are works of social relations, and that games facilitate these perhaps more than other forms. The similarities between the artwork and the game are recognized in both the studio and in theoretical circles. Games offer the artist, critic, and social designer the possibility of sculpting cultural practice of contemporary importance.

*** Tiltfactor team members Suyin Looui, Jonathan Belman, and Jay Bachhuber were co-designers for Soba and Wancan; Anna Lotko and Zara Downs on MuShu; Jennifer Jacobs, Brian Mayzak, Greg Kohl, Chris Egert, Grace Peng,*

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