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DESIGNING FOR CRITICAL PLAY

Play is grounded in the concept of possibility.

-Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett, "An Exploratory Model of Play"

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

If, as according to Bennett and Csikszentmihalyi, "Play is grounded in the concept of possibility,'" then critical play is the avant-garde of games as a medium. But where is play critical? When assessed in terms of criticality, a wealth of questions

arises concerning the way games actually function. The last chapters have provided theories, approaches, and examples to help address some important questions: Can games be activist? Does play raise critical awareness or does it minimize its effects? What is the role of the arts in games, and can methods derived from artists make a difference? Can the various methods of creation followed by the artists discussed in prior chapters offer novel approaches to actively reshaping everyday playculture?

Marshall McLuhan was ahead of his time in understanding that "Art, like games or popular arts, and like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures. 112 From doll play to wordplay, from Simultanism to various Surrealist games, there is a good deal of evidence that the processes of artists in pursuit of critical play can offer research methods, actions, and play situations, whether sites or collections of one of more actions, that are adaptable to present concerns. The critical play method I propose here should provide an effective model for designers and artists to use to engage in, and encourage, critical play in both game making and game playing. Critical play can and should be included in the traditional game design process. By proposing this design model and creating games with this set of strategies, it is hoped that other practitioners, artists, designers, scientists, and researchers will be able to question and elucidate many of the so-called "norms" embedded in our current play frameworks and technology practices, ultimately including a more diverse set of voices in the game design community and a wider spectrum of

game experiences.

<div align="center">Why Care about Methods?</div>

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

However, if we look to the fundamental reasons for why we play, the connection between artistic methods, activism, and game design becomes clear. There is something about designing play, especially the process of conceptualizing and making games, that requires an attention to possibility. As in art, the creation of play and games necessitates rule making at a fundamental level. Even simple role-playing activities, or playing house, both seemingly limitless open-play scenarios, include implicit or explicit rules that establish behavior, possible actions, environments, and the safe zone for play itself. Due to the systemic nature of both the product and the process, game

makers use particular repeatable processes, or methods. Like activists, game designers also follow an overall scheme of investigation or research, creating processes to address specific concerns and ideas. In addition, the creation of rules of operation makes interesting constraints to provoke innovation in both the designer's process and the player's role.

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

Furthermore, as a site for production and consumption of culture, community, language, commerce, work, and leisure, playculture is what can be termed a "thirdspace," which Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture calls the space of subversion, hybridity, and blasphemy. In fact, Bhabha argues that hybridity and cultural translation are in themselves subversive ideas, and

therefore must be the place where binary divisions are challenged.' Urban planner Edward Soja argues that all spaces are "thirdspaces" which are lived and imagined spaces in between empirical or the previously understood geographies and physical forms of "firstspace" and the conceptual, ideological, or semiotic spaces of representation and mental forms of "secondspace." Thirdspace is the site for play and struggle. Players may eschew binary oppositions and allow for the possibility of a subject to be simultaneously in several spatialities. As Soja points out, spaces are socially produced (1996) and thirdspaces are the only sites that contain the possibility for social and political transformation (1999). As Anne-Marie Schleiner notes, "Instead of replicating the binary logic of the shooter genre, of Cowboys and Indians, of the football game, if the US government borrowed tactics from real time strategy gainers or RPGers, we might be looking at a different global response. 114

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

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

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

consequences, the game creation process must mature to allow constant review and much more "reflection."

The Critical Play Method

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

• Seta design goal (also known as a mission statement). The designer sets the goals necessary for the project.

• Develop the minimum rules and assets necessary for the goal. The game designers rough out a framework for play, including the types of tokens, characters, props, and so on.

• Develop a playable prototype. The game idea is mocked up. This is most efficiently done on paper or by acting it out during the early stages of design.

• Play test. Various players try the game and evaluate it, finding dead ends and boring sections, and exploring the types of difficulty associated with the various tasks.

• Revise. Revising or elaborating on the goal, the players offer feedback, and the designers revamp the game system to improve it.

• Repeat. The preceding steps in the process are repeated to make sure the game is engrossing and playable before it "ships" or is posted to a website.

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

I wish to appraise this process in light of the myriad critical approaches to projects included in this book. Part of this process is a constant reflection on the humanistic themes, or values, during design. At least one designer, Donald Schon, refers to a "reflective practice" as a methodology and encourages makers to step outside their processes to "see the big picture." For Schon, it is important that the experiments do not "confirm" an "answer" to a challenge, but affirm that challenge instead. Schon's approach avoids the traditional goal of a final, or definitive, resolution and involves shaping and altering priorities as a result of findings. Schon notes, "It is the logic of affirmation which sets the boundaries of experimental rigor."' Other reflective frameworks, such as the "critical technical practice," which is advanced primarily by computer science practitioners working on artificial intelligence, have similar aims. A growing number of designers are committing to the notion of a continuing dialogue between values and practice.10 In sum, reflective

practice encourages designers and technologists to verify that both their design goals and their values goals are supported.
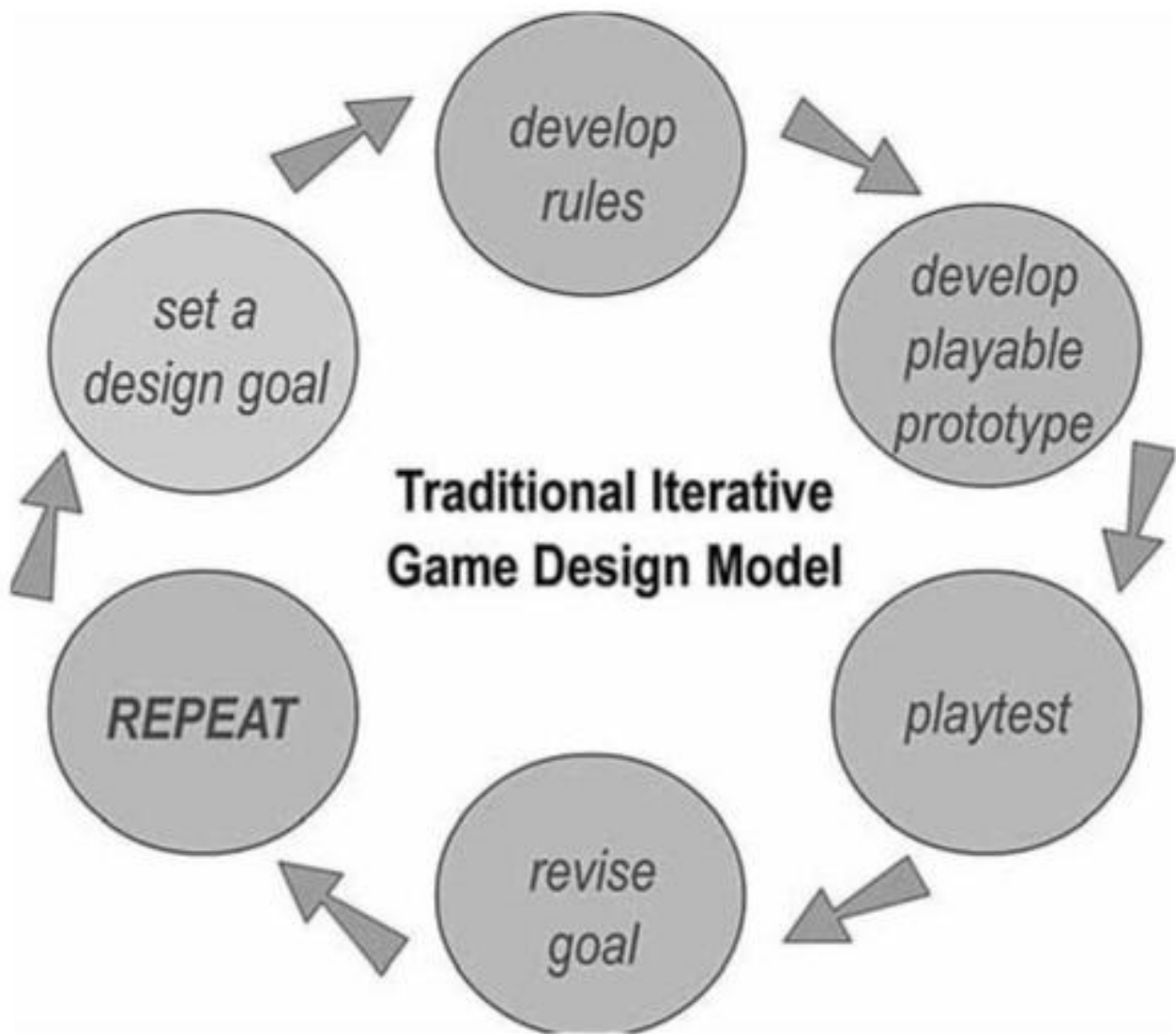
I Figure 8.1 1

Mary Flanagan, model of iterative design process.

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

therefore look like this:

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

But a critical design methodology requires the shifting of authority and power relations more toward a nonhierarchical, participatory exchange. While the games made might disrupt the existing social realities offered by most popular games, they also

disrupt the design process itself. Instead of compliance to a pattern whereby the usual designers develop the usual ideas through the usual stages for the usual players, what is needed now is a model that will augment these practical but limited stages of the design process in a way that addresses intervention, disruption, and social issues and goals alongside of, or even as, design goals embedded into the mechanic and game elements.
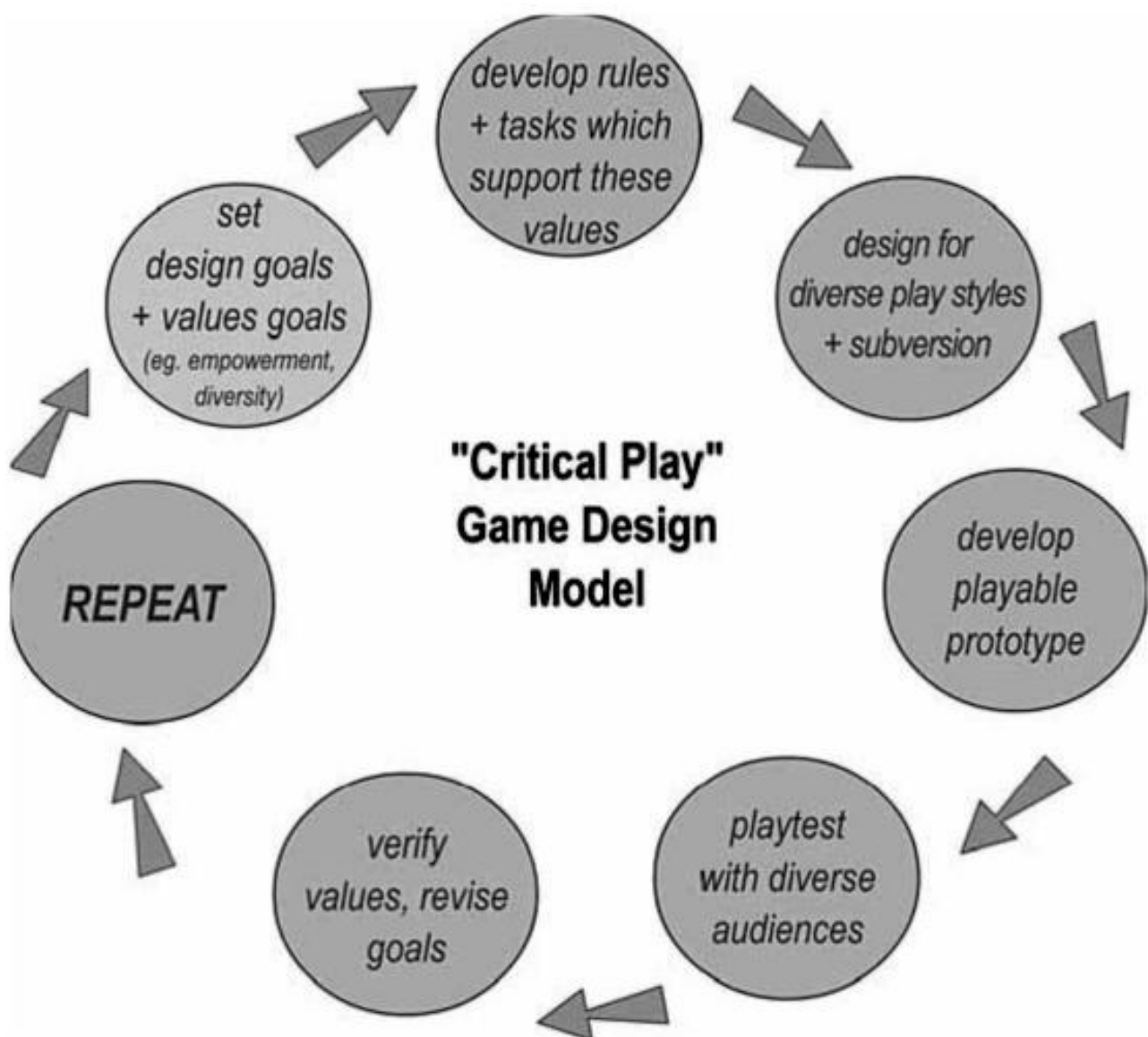
I Figure 8.2 1

Mary Flanagan, model of critical play method.

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

• Set a design goal/mission statement and values goals. The designer sets the goals necessary for the project to create meaningful play, and sets one or more equally weighted values goals.

• Develop rules and constraints that support values. The game designers rough out a framework for play, including the types of tokens, characters, props, etc. necessary to support the game's values and play.

• Design for many different play styles. The designer could, for example, provide for a noncompetitive type of play alongside a competitive play scenario. The designer should design for subversion of the system and other means by which play can emerge.

• Develop a playable prototype. The idea is mocked up on paper or by acting it out during the early stages of design.

• Play test with diverse audiences. Designers need to get out of

the studio or laboratory and play test with a wide-ranging audience, making sure to play with nontraditional gainers. Various players test the game for dead ends and dull sections, and types and levels of task difficulty.

• Verify values and revise goals. Designers evaluate the game through the play tests and player comments. They verify that the values goals emerge through play, and revise goals and add or drop options based on feedback to ensure an engaging game and support the project values.

• Repeat. This process is repeated to make sure the game supports the values it set out to frame and support, as well as provide an engrossing and playable experience. These two criteria for success must be measured in each iterative cycle.

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

The iterative design process is well known; research has shown that iterative cycles can help designers facilitate feedback,

including the discussion and evaluation of embedded social issues, while keeping the creation of a game more dynamic." For artists making games, this approach is useful too. The cyclical nature of the creative process can serve as a parallel studio practice and involve the community with which the artist wishes to engage. After all, games are dynamic systems.

In making anything, however, there tends to be a gap between what was intended and what actually is created. Here, a critical play perspective engages a diverse audience of testers to ensure that the particular aspects of the project that are informed by conceptual, thematic, and technological factors continue to "say the same thing" once the project is finished. This agreement to examine the "doing" of "practice" can be of use in the laboratories of artists as well as those of independent designers interested in politics or social justice.

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

Design Actions and Design Methods

Deleuze argues that as people, we "normally perceive only cliches. But, if our sensorymotor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character. 1114 For art to move beyond cliche, Deleuze believes it must engage with a set of strategies "to show how and in what sense" an image means x or y to wrest the image away from the danger of cliche. 15 Therefore, one of the most important frameworks critical play can provide is a range of examples that show what artists have done in their creation of games and play. Throughout this book, I've examined the ways artists have used doll play, instructions, obnoxious language, tactile letters, street text, and maps in their games to pose questions. Other practices, like Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," offer further insights on ways to move both the game developer and the game player beyond "normalcy." Each chapter of this book can be used to generate strategies meant to inspire other artists, designers, and innovators. From chapter 4 alone, the tactics include:

• writing commands or instructions

• using obnoxious language

• making humans into puppets

• making computer programs that write poems

• making words tactile

• creating instruction paintings

• making palindromes

• shifting points of view

• creating sound poetry

• making text that is a street intervention

• skywriting

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

• Simultanism, a method defined as a telescoping of time

• free verse/free visual verse

automatism

• the drift, derive, detournement, and psychogeography

These methods preserve what has been accomplished in critical play and will, in turn, help designers examine "what's out there" in contemporary circles, providing a vocabulary for existent techniques that risk going unnoticed. But while play, art, and politics are intertwined, the ways in which designers and artists can intervene currently remain in the affordances of these fields. As Jacques Ranciere notes, "The arts only ever lend to

projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and invisible..""

Shifts in Play

In addition, criticality in play can be fostered in order to question certain aspects of game content, or certain aspects of play's scenario function, many of which might otherwise be simply assumed necessary. Guattari, for one, calls on the arts to produce a "refoundation of the problematic of subjectivity," wanting to bring to forward "a partial subjectivity-pre-personal, polyphonic, collective, and machinic..."" In a similar vein, Yale professor James C. Scott writes about subjugated persons and how the subjugated public resists power (1990). He examines the spaces where those dominated can express their "hidden transcript," or offset narrative, one that serves to critique those in power.' It is easy to see that games provide one such outlet. An effort to reveal or make visible these "hidden transcripts" that often lie among the "official transcripts" of power relations parallels the investigations of many players and artists in a variety of milieus. Is this not the essence of unplaying? If Sutton-Smith is correct in asserting that much of what children do in play serves as compensation for their general life conditions, then the hidden transcript played by those who are far from empowered can perhaps communicate to game designers important strategies through which games can expose, validate, or celebrate these equally valid modes of discourse.'" In turn, players may use this information and their experiences to alter the social institutions

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we live by. Using the critical play method, the role of the designer can widen to include an analytical framework for comprehension or analysis, characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces.

The challenge, then, is to find ways to make interesting, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking and to encourage designers to offer many possibilities in games, for a wide range of players, with a wide range of interests and social roles. We can manifest a different future. It is not enough to simply call for change and then hope for the best; we need interventions at the level of popular culture.21

Too often social challenges are presented in overwhelming or depressing ways. Most players are not attracted to overly didactic communication. After all, play occurs only when players feel comfortable. Play is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems. Play offers a way to capture player interest without sacrificing the process of thinking through problems that are organized subjectively. Games engineer subjectivity because they create, or rather they are, both affective and relational systems, both for the designer and for the player. Critical play is not about making experts, but about designing spaces where diverse minds feel comfortable enough to take part in the discovery of solutions. Derived from artists' creative processes, investigations, and practical work, critical

play is to popular computer games what performance art once was to the traditional, well-made stage play. As in that earlier shift, critical play demands a new awareness of design values and power relations, a recognition of audience and player diversities, a refocusing on the relational and performative as opposed to the object, and a continued and sustained appreciation of the subversive. Critical play is also a new discipline of theory and practice that embodies a set of methods and actions. The critical play method is intended as a tool for future game makers, play designers, and scholars. The desired results are new games that innovate due to their critical approach, games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play.

Just as artists have long experimented with such transcripts and have worked to integrate social concerns in their work, game designers have the option to open up, experiment with, unplay, reskin, and rewrite the hidden transcripts so tenaciously rooted in the systems of our world. As we have seen, social climates and technological changes have greatly affected play environments on an everyday level. Shifts in play have historically mirrored shifts in technology and these shifts in technology signal shifts in societal norms. With groups tired of isolation and longing for community, the rise of massively multiplayer online role-playing games and social networks have provided a few ways to relink communities. The continuing popularity of Come Out and Play events in major global cities demonstrates that the public wants to play, and play outside, because of what games are: creative, collective, and social reactions to the dominant practices and

beliefs of any culture.' From these simple examples, it is possible to see how games in and of themselves function as a social technology. Games distill or abstract the everyday actions of players. Games also imprint our culture with the motives and values of their designers. Above all, a game is an opportunity, an easy-to-understand instrument by which context is defamiliarized just enough to allow what Huizinga famously refers to as his "a magic circle" of play to occur.