Critical Play

Radical Game Design

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INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL PLAY

> By the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.
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> —Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*

For many game players, games exist for entertainment, for passing the time, for fun. They are a diversionary activity, meant for relaxation or distraction—a "not-work" space where players are free to engage in fantasy narratives, amazing feats, and rewarding tasks. But what if certain games have become something *more*? What if some games, and the more general concept of "play," not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues?

Each day, computer users check email, search for movie trailers or the news, and perhaps blog, balance a budget, or download digital camera images. They also play computer games—simultaneously during these other tasks, as in casual games, or in more comprehensive games both on- and offline, such as the multiplayer PC game *World of Warcraft* or a console game such as *Katamari Damashii*. Computer and console games have become a significant cultural medium across a wide range of social, economic, age, and gender categories.[1] As the game industry involves an increasing number of educators, designers, and scientists, there is considerable need for games that take on, and challenge, the accepted norms embedded in the gaming industry. There is a need for a critical approach not only in examining such games but also in creating them.

Critical Play is the first book to examine alternative games and use such games as models to propose a theory of avant-garde game design—that is, like alternative

theories of narrative texts, poetry, and film, a theory that focuses on the reworking of contemporary, popular game practices to propose an alternative, or "radical," game design. Specifically, this book investigates games designed for artistic, political, and social critique or intervention, in order to propose ways of understanding larger cultural issues as well as the games themselves.

The research for *Critical Play* grew out of an avid interest in popular computer games technology, history, and cultural studies, as well as my own creative work: I use play and game fundamentals in projects as diverse as activist software design, classroom teaching, and drawings, installation, and sculpture that appear in more traditional art venues. The games and other works I discovered while investigating my interests in social issues are collected in this book. In the course of so much play, I became fascinated with observing how ideas about politics, play, and games were most interesting in those projects operating outside the software, board-game, or theme park industries—not only among those who are independent game developers but also those who thought of making play scenarios or games within the context of being artists. Art has long been intertwined with politics; the twentieth century has witnessed provocative materials produced during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Constructivist political design used in the Russian Revolution of 1917, the theatrical protests in World Wars I and II, the 1968 student postering campaigns, and the U.S. civil rights campaigns that used mixed media. *Critical Play* outlines how play has influenced the history of creative exploration of the social and the political. The book's arrival is well timed, for this is a significant era in which to learn how to play in ways that break the mold and open up what play can be, and at the same time possibly benefit someone or something.

Prior to this project, few researchers had advanced gaming scholarship from the point of view of art history. Numerous scholarly studies have focused on the early forms of computer gaming as a field, in topics such as early console games or the history of gaming at Atari. In this book, I have studiously avoided these too-common examples, for several reasons. First, typical histories of computer games have not examined the practice of play outside the realm of computers. Second, these historical studies do not generally involve artists and their social and cultural roles, either in the making or the playing capacity. Third, few of these studies have made any serious attempt to ground contemporary gaming in creative and aesthetic origins rather than a primarily technological context; and fourth, few have made the connection between games and art.

On first glance, it may seem a stretch to perceive how artists working in a very different place and during very different eras would be able to significantly contribute

to the manners, modes, and processes for making games today. Computer games are often seen as a new medium, and not necessarily aligned with other forms of play. Few would imagine that such play could also be related to ancient divination, psychoanalysis, utopian tax laws, social protest, or environmentalism. While recognizing certain distinctions, *Critical Play* looks to the commonalities among play activities, game genres, and important historical contexts to discover thematic ways in which play can continue to manifest critical thinking.

As Marcel Duchamp said in 1946,

The great trouble with art in this country [the United States] at present, and apparently in France also, is that there is no spirit of revolt—no new ideas appearing among the younger artists. They are following along the paths beaten out by their predecessors, trying to do better what their predecessors have already done. In art there is no such thing as perfection. And a creative lull occurs always when artists of a period are satisfied to pick up a predecessor's work where he dropped it and attempt to continue what he was doing. When on the other hand you pick up something from an earlier period and adapt it to your own work an approach can be creative. The result is not new; but it is new insomuch as it is a different approach.[2]

Whether one believes Duchamp's criticism could apply today, his call for innovation is one that can speak to many. In this book, I will explore historic instances of artists using play in their work. I consider given projects amid the shifting historical context for play, the political use of play, and look also to contemporary artists using physical, locative, and computer games in their work. In the spirit of activist art, *Critical Play* primarily focuses on individual artists or collectives of artists making work because they have something to say.[3] The creative experiments with games described in this book help provide a provocative look at how artists can challenge ideas, beliefs, and social expectations and subsequently transform them in their work. These experiments are particularly worthy of note in an era of increasing financial stakes in the games industry, the decline in "street protest" and civil actions, and citizens' overall lack of time and sense of agency. Taking wild chances to provoke, disrupt, and change even in play appears to be risky business.

Using the term *artist* to describe anyone making creative work can be off-putting to some readers, particularly readers in the various professional fields who might find the term exclusionary. The term *artist* is used here with a particular meaning in mind, to refer to those who are creating outside commercial establishments, and often, those

who are "making" for "making's sake." Therefore, while a short section on social impact games is included in the book, these may tend to be more focused in scope and scale and work with more traditional "industry-style" methods instead of the more avant-garde practices that have become many artists' focus. The voices of the alternative social impact game makers, however, represent a voice of critical play that needs to be explored.

Critical Play is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Artists using games as a *medium of expression*, then, manipulate elements common to games—representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, context of reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game—for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions. Artists have indeed "revolted" effectively before, transforming popular culture around the globe for the last century and a half. *Critical Play* documents this promise of large-scale transformation.

Defining Some Key Terms

What is, for the purposes of this study, the first key term, *play*? And what does it mean to play *critically*? Play is a notoriously difficult concept to define; it is a culturally and socially specific idea. Anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith, a leader in twentieth-century research in play, and one of the core play theorists used in this book, has defined play consistently through the years as an activity that is fun, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, incorporates free choices/free will, offers escape, and is fundamentally exciting.[4] He has argued that play activities can be grouped in four categories: play as learning, play as power, play as fantasy, and play as self.[5] While quick to recognize the dark side of play, including bullying, abusive situations, and frightening circumstances, Sutton-Smith also notes that play can be defined as a variety of activities: as exchanges of power, or "power plays" that prioritize competition and traditionally aggressive play styles; as the act of bonding and belonging; as a practice of real-life functions; and as "fun," being with friends, and choosing freely.[6] Play is recognized as one of the most fundamental aspects of the human condition.[7] While play spaces are generally fantasy spaces, players often experience real stakes when inside them. One might easily find examples of the "serious" aspects of play in sport and gambling.

Play is an integral and vital part of mental development and learning, and playful activities are essential aspects of learning and creative acts. Historically, there have been two "camps" in the study of play: those who see play as voluntary, intrinsic, and

important to class structure (leisure) and socialization (members of this camp Sutton-Smith calls "the idealizers"), such as Huizinga and Caillois; and those who look more to ritual, to communication, and who study play in natural settings, such as Bateson, Turner, and Sutton-Smith himself. In this look at critical play, I use the strengths of both camps. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith suggests that play provides a working model of species variability by incorporating mental feedback that keeps a species flexible in evolution. He particularly focuses on play's potential to help define social norms and identity, noting that the "use of play forms as forms of bonding, including the exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community" is essential to cultural formation.[8] By playing together, people form close communities and develop a group identity and a sense of belonging. Play can also function as a tool to understand the self. Many anthropologists like Sutton-Smith have argued that play is the way children work out social and cultural norms. "Play can cure children of the hypocrisies of adult life," notes Sutton-Smith, arguing that children's play spanning from early childhood to teenage years offers narratives that negotiate the risks of the real world: "These stories exhibit anger, fear, shock, sadness, and disgust."[9]

Johan Huizinga, in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, defines play in an extraordinarily loose way: play is a "function of the living, but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or aesthetically."[10] Huizinga rather defines the formal characteristics of play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life."[11] Other aspects include play as a voluntary activity, executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, having rules freely accepted but absolutely binding.[12] In play, the aim is play itself, not success or interaction in ordinary life. Unlike Sutton-Smith, Huizinga focuses on adult play, and he argues that play activities tend not to be serious in and of themselves but shape culture nonetheless through ritual and social custom. At the same time, they absorb the player utterly in a special time and place set aside for play: "a closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings" that he later famously refers to as "the magic circle."[13]

Distinct themes emerge in scholarship attempting to define play. Most anthropologists and historians agree that play is central to human and animal life; is generally a voluntary act; offers pleasure in its own right (and by its own rules); is mentally or physically challenging; and is separated from reality, either through a sanctioned play space or through an agreed upon fantasy or rule set.[14] Because play and the ordinary world are intermingled amid the increasing popularity of games (specifically, at present, computer games and sports), games are becoming the "sacred spots" Huizinga identifies in his anthropological writing.[15]

Critical Play

Games ultimately create cognitive and epistemological environments that position the player or participant with the experiences previously described in meaningful ways. So what does it mean to "play critically"? Critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, such as rethinking cooperation, or winning, or losing; or concrete, involved with content issues such as looking at the U.S. military actions in Cambodia in the early 1970s. Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game's "content," or an aspect of a play scenario's function that might otherwise be considered a given or necessary. Criticality can provide an essential viewpoint or an analytical framework. Those using critical play as an approach might create a platform of rules by which to examine a specific issue—rules that would be somehow relevant to the issue itself. Critical play is 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 compelling, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking to offer novel possibilities in games, and for a wide range of players. Thus the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person's interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase change.

Games

Another key term used throughout this text is *games*, to refer to those instances of more-or-less constructed play scenarios. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), among other games scholars, note the wide variety of definitions of the term "game." Historically speaking, the challenge of defining games has occurred throughout 150 years of game scholarship and research, with the most recent turn in computer games studies yielding related questions. In his 1984 book *The Art of Computer Game Design*, one of the first books detailing the intricacies of thinking about computers as gaming platforms, Chris Crawford contrasts what he calls "games" with "puzzles." Puzzles are static; they present the player with a logical puzzle to be solved with the assistance of clues. Games, however, can evolve, and rules may shift at certain points in a game and can change with the player's actions.

Greg Costikyan (1994) also has a concrete definition of what constitutes a game, which he describes as "a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal."[16] In much of game scholarship, it has been argued that games are by their definition

competitive in that they always have an end point—a winning or losing state. But Costikyan avoids the "win/lose" dichotomy as the only possible goal for players. He additionally details how the structure of games compares to other kinds of experiences, such as stories:

Stories are inherently linear. However much characters may agonize over the decisions they make, they make them the same way every time we reread the story, and the outcome is always the same. . . . Games are inherently non-linear. They depend on decision-making. Decisions have to pose real, plausible alternatives, or they aren't real decisions. It must be entirely reasonable for a player to make a decision one way in one game, and a different way in the next. To the degree that you make a game more like a story—more linear, fewer real options—you make it less like a game.[17]

While Costikyan believes that stories are linear but games are not, the key to the preceding text is his attention to "real options" for players to pursue. Generally, this is referred to as player agency, or the player's ability to make choices that mean something to him or her.[18] Salen and Zimmerman (2003) also discuss the designer's ability to create situations for "meaningful play." They have provided students of game design perhaps the most codified definition of a game: "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome."[19] Salen and Zimmerman offer six key game concepts in their influential game creation book, *Rules of Play*:

1. a game is a system
2. it is artificial
3. it has players
4. it has conflict
5. it has rules
6. it contains a quantifiable outcome/goal, an ending state in which players can either be considered the "winners" or the "losers."[20]

Each of these canonical authors in the field of digital game design—Crawford, Costikyan, and Salen and Zimmerman—notes the importance of rules in constructing games, with varying degrees of storytelling, conflict, and competition added into the (often, technology driven) system. In this book, I choose not to follow such strict definitions. Games can be thought of more productively as situations with guidelines and procedures. Perhaps games are *themselves* a technology.

Technology

In organized play and games, rules have a mechanical rigor and are followed as procedures. These take on a kind of algorithmic specificity as players enact meaning through following rule sets. In this way, technological change has been interlinked with changes in play and gaming practices. "All art derives from play," noted Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, his famous book exploring the human interest in play. This sentiment inspires one to examine both the notion of "art" and the notion of "play" within twentieth-century creative practices.

Shifts in play have historically mirrored shifts in technologies. This is evident in the invention of organized doll play and "playing house" during the U.S. industrial revolution, when gender roles needed to be reasserted due to changing labor conditions.[21] The link among the reorganization of banking, financial systems, and property ownership in twentieth-century U.S. culture mirrored the rise of financially focused board games such as *Monopoly*.[22] Later chapters will examine inventions such as Edison's mechanical doll and other, literal "play" technologies. But play shifts have done more than utilize such new inventions. Even play that does not involve gadgets or devices might be considered a technology. Games and play activities themselves, with their emphasis on order and conventions, act as technologies that produce sets of relationships, governed by time and rules, played out in behavioral patterns. Even a simple game of hopscotch (figure 1.1), in the hands of an artist, could become a kind of technology.

In the age-old playground game of hopscotch, a play space is drawn on the ground and shared among players. Each takes a turn tossing the potsy, hopping the length of the "map," and returning to the beginning. Hopscotch is one of those universal games that many people seem to recognize. As respected twentieth-century media theorist Marshall McLuhan noted, such "games as popular art forms offer to all an immediate means of participation in the full life of a society, such as no single role or job can offer to any man."[23]

If the hopscotch map contained numbers, the sequence would likely take on meaning for players (marking spaces toward the end of the map, or representing points to add or subtract) but this very simple game could also affect or create social relations. What if the numbers were a collection of points, and the person who had the highest (or fewest) won, regardless of order? If the map size is scaled much larger than is typical, some players would have unfair advantage to win over others (by having longer legs, for example). If two hopscotch maps are laid side-by-side, players might play for speed, one racing against another. Players waiting in line might try to distract the hopping player, waving arms or mocking to make the hopper miss the target square;
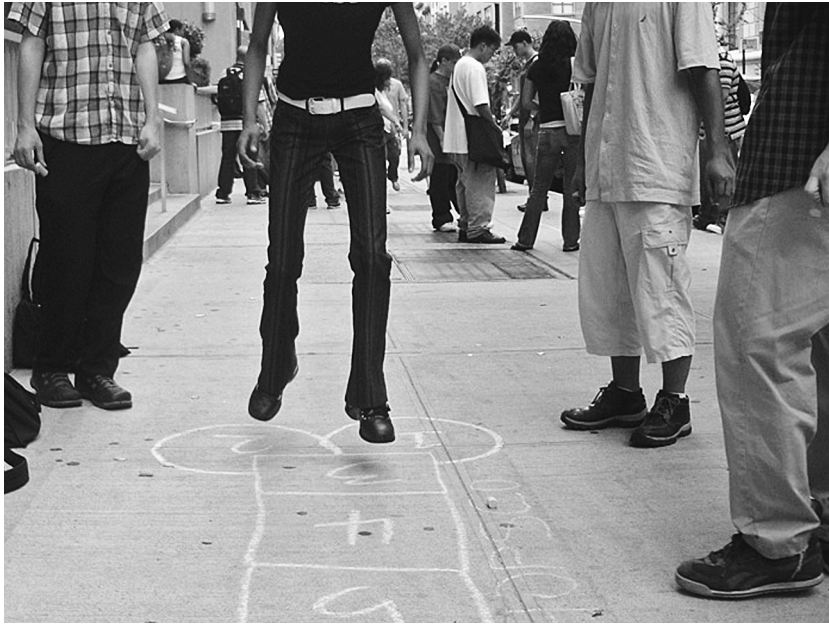
| **Figure 1.1** |
[mapscotch], 2007, artist's reworking of hopscotch, by the author.

this type of activity would not be explicitly forbidden by the rules and would thus fall into the realm of peer sanctioned or accepted play. In other words, how the game is designed and presented carries implications for the social group. Some players might opt not to play (and become perhaps an onlooker, witness, or referee); some players might choose to compete. Other players might choose to break the explicit game rules by skipping ahead in line or by jumping on the wrong spaces in order to get ahead. Games, functioning as an ordering logic—a machine, or a technology—for creating social relations, work to distill or abstract the everyday actions of the players into easy-to-understand instruments where context is defamiliarized just enough to allow Huizinga's magic circle of play to manifest. From this one example, it is possible to see how games in and of themselves function as *social technologies*.

If games themselves act as types of technologies, then technological games are twofold in their capacity for meaning making. Most students of the evolution of digital gaming begin their studies among the technological milestones of computing: Vannevar Bush's technological fantasies, the ENIAC computer, the 1961 *SpaceWars!* game

at MIT, the release of *Pong* by Atari in 1972, or the success of *Pac-Man* when the Buckner and Garcia song "Pac-Man Fever" hit the charts in 1982. Those studying contemporary game design, especially in programs highlighting the role of technology, rarely tap links to the seemingly distant domain of the arts. Likewise, those studying popular culture rarely cross into the realm of institutions such as galleries, museums, and private collections. One of the most important reasons to make such a crossing is that shifts in art movements, like technologies, also indicate (and mirror) world events; these specifically include international events such as the world wars, as well as the cultural and social movements affecting everyday citizens and arts practitioners. For example, at the same time in the early twentieth century that Marcel Duchamp was engaging "high art" audiences to make their own decisions about the nature of art—his famous quote "The spectator makes the picture," is an example of this philosophy—through his multitemporal paintings and "readymade" found art objects, American cinema fans were participating similarly in early "low art" media culture through newly created fan discourse. Meanwhile, still other avant-garde artists were adopting and reconfiguring themes from culture altogether in their work—take, for example, the board games critical of war by Alberto Giacometti and compare them to the origins of *Monopoly*, the famous Parker Brothers game originally created by a social activist to protest landlords and tax policies. These are examples of the interesting juxtapositions and discoveries the reader will make in this book.

Subversion

Notions of subversion, disruption, and intervention are bandied about along with notions of the critical by artists and activists, and need further articulation. Artists have long reused, worked against, or invented new media forms and conventions: early twentieth-century innovator Marcel Duchamp turned urinals into scandalous "readymade" sculpture.[24] Photographer Claude Cahun, cross-dressing and infantilizing herself, performed over-the-top gender stereotypes in her self-portrait photographs dating from the 1930s to the 1940s.[25] Surrealists fashioned experimental films, inverting trends in cinematic narrative and visual conventions, even "cutting the eye" (such as in the famed Surrealist film *Un chien andalou* of 1929) for both shock value and as a statement against overly controlling aesthetics.[26] These are only a few examples from myriad artistic practices that survive in significance because they broke the rules.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, subversion is "the turning (of a thing) upside down or uprooting it from its position; overturning, upsetting; overthrow of a law, rule, system, condition."[27] A subversion is an action, plan, or activity intended to undermine an institution, event, or object. When discussing subversion, it is necessary

to know what system or phenomenon in particular one is working against, be it political, social, legal, or cultural. In this book I extend the term *subversion* from the definitions provided by Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci,[28] Michel Foucault,[29] Judith Butler,[30] and others.[31] The core ideas regarding this term evolved from Antonio Negri's work on subversion (2001) as well as themes of disruption and intervention from decades of art practices. Subversion has been identified by several theorists and practitioners as a powerful means for marginalized groups to have a voice.[32] Likely this focus is due to the activist call to examine how power relationships play out and how social change is actually orchestrated. Much of Negri's writing emerged during his long house arrest in Italy for his political acts, and his ideas are a culmination of much contemplation on how contemporary culture operates. Negri's is a dual view; he writes of both the difficulty of "breaking out" against power, and the inherent encapsulation and control by those in power of subversive acts. When working against pervasive systems of power, he notes that subversive practices *still* have the power to trigger social change when used on the right scale and with the right tools. Perhaps games are such a tool: Negri notes that subversion is *necessary* within a multitude of organizations in myriad types of forms, and not merely for the functioning of such organizations but for individual and collective well-being.[33] Negri and others use the term *subversion* to mean a creative act rather than a destructive act.

Because they primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices. A hallmark of games is that they are structured by their rule sets, and every game has its "cheats"—even play itself, pushing at the boundaries of a game system, could be said to involve a kind of subversion. This idea is supported by games scholarship; to scholars of play such as Brian Sutton-Smith, play is associated, at least in part, with transgressive and subversive actions.

"Interventions" are specific types of subversions that rely upon direct action and engage with political or social issues—a "'stepping in', or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue."[34] Rather than reducing these actions to limiting categories, it is more fitting to situate the actions of artists among a loose set of principles that guide interventions. The introduction of art objects and performance into public spaces, for example, is a way that artists appropriate the cognitive space of public space, of everyday space, and functions in an interventionist fashion. Artists practicing intervention often have social or political goals, and may seek to open up dialogue by transgressing the boundaries between art and everyday life. With the exception of purely aesthetic movements (abstract expressionism comes to mind), most twentieth-century art movements fostered interventionist activities and strategies, particularly those identified as the avant-garde. Numerous twentieth-century avant-garde artists

had the shared goal of bringing about private and public transformation through crea-
tive acts.[35] Thus some artistic intervention takes the form of performance, parody,
simulation, game, activist, and "hacktivist" strategies. Intervention has been a popular
strategy with street performance and activism: feminist theater groups reworked per-
formance practices, for example, and turned to street theater for intervention.[36] Guer-
rilla street theater of the 1960s and 1970s by El Teatro Campesino, the Farmworkers'
theater, The Black Revolutionary Theatre (BRT) led by Amiri Baraka, or the media
interventions of Nikki Craft, Martha Rosler, or Joan Braderman were able to disrupt
everyday activities when the "street," not the computer, was the gateway to cultural
intervention.[37]

    A number of artists have invested in interventionist strategies, and they are docu-
mented in this book. These artists, and many more, intervened in contemporary art
venues, took over traditional art styles to change them, or depicted narratives that
operated against social norms. Since the 1960s, numerous artists have furthered these
interests without a particular art movement identity, such as Jenny Holzer and Rachel
Whiteread, but who reflect an international current in art that subverts everyday lived
experience by exposing negative or unexpected visions of the everyday.[38]

    Finally, contemporary electronic artists negotiate between traditional, institution-
alized aesthetic discourses and emergent, organic forms of social communication. If
electronic art has become an experimental laboratory, not so much for new technology
as for new social relations of communication, then perhaps electronic games might
operate in an interventionist way within electronic spaces and discourses.[39]

    The definition of the term *disruption* lies somewhere in between the concepts of
intervention and subversion. A useful term derived from "Disruption-Innovation"
theory in the IT business innovation field, a disruption is a creative act that shifts the
way a particular logic or paradigm is operating.[40] In the high-tech arena, disruptive
innovators are those who introduce relatively simple yet "paradigm-shifting" solu-
tions to a particular market. Examples in business include Dell computer's direct-
to-customer sales model or its "song per song" online music sales, which are examples
of low-end disruption.[41] Other disruptive innovations create entirely new markets.
By creating need and new venues for products, the disruption effectively competes
against very little. Businesses spawned from such an approach include Starbucks and
eBay (which Harvard innovation theorist Clayton Christensen and his collaborators,
Erik Roth and Scott Anthony, argue "democratized" the auction process). Disruption-
Innovation theory influences game design, for if it is intervention and subversion that
artists seek, they create this within the confines of a new kind of game design.

As detailed later, a great deal of pleasure for players can be derived from subverting set interaction norms in both simple play environments and highly complex games. Players will consistently explore what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary between rules and expectations, and a player's own agency, within any given play environment—no matter how structured that play is. From hockey, to chess, to playing dolls or "house," player subversion—as cheating, as open play, as social critique—is an intrinsic part of play.[42] If digital artifacts have truly become a magic circle in which players enter a sanctioned play space, then this culture of play, or playculture, as it is commonly termed, is one in which participants find a space for permission, experimentation, and subversion. In the following chapters, I will postulate the possible historic reasons for the necessity of this stance.

What Are Activist Games?

In this book I use the terms *activist game* and *activist game design*. Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention. In other words, they are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through game mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone. This is not to say that activist games cannot, or should not, be "fun," though this has been a critique of many activist games to date. The term "activist game," however, is meant to specify the game theme and sometimes-desired outcomes for playing the game, and only one of the desired outcomes would be entertainment.

Activist approaches to media are important to the study of digital culture precisely because of media's inherent imbalances. Indeed, issues of gender, racial, ethnic, language, and class inequities and imbalances are also manifest in the historic imbalances with technology production and use. Take, for example, the fact that women constitute only 10 percent of the computer-game industry workforce, or that less than 10 percent of all programmers in the United States are women. These imbalances extend in a sometimes subtle fashion to who uses these tools and spaces on a daily basis. Even renowned media scholar Henry Jenkins, among others, noted over a decade ago that video game spaces are gendered spaces.[43] Gender imbalance in technical and visual culture triggered one of the most significant critiques of film and visual representation: Laura Mulvey, in her 1970s analysis of the visual representation of woman in cinema, inspired myriad progressive experiments calling attention to the representation

of women in commercial imagery and film.[44] In the area of video games, significant essays critiquing the continued problematic representation of gender in video games (Flanagan, Anne-Marie Schleiner) and race (Jennifer González, Lisa Nakamura) continue to call these issues into question.

Design Actions and Design Methods

One of the most important things *Critical Play* provides is a range of examples demonstrating what artists have done in their creation of games and play. These can inspire other artists, designers, and innovators. Some artists make instructions for actions, and even paintings; some playful disruptors use obnoxious language and make humans into puppets; while others write computer programs that write poems. Some even project their games onto bridges or have players dress up as chickens. Artists make words touchable, create palindromes, do street intervention, and even skywrite from airplanes to disrupt the everyday actions in the city. These activities are spurred on by the methods developed over the last century, including Simultanism, which means a telescoping of time; free verse/free visual verse; automatism and automatic writing; exquisite corpse; and the drift of psychogeography fame (all explained more fully in later chapters).

The Chapters

The games explored in the following chapters range from playing doll and playing house to board games, performative games, locative media games, and computer games. Each chapter explores historic instances of a particular game genre, as well as how art and social movements have engaged with it.

In chapter 2, I review the history of domestic play as particularly relevant to game design, especially given that the majority of contemporary computer-based games are experienced in domestic environments. I look at the resurgence of popular domestic play in games such as *The Sims* and artists' projects that function as critical play in domestic space, and I present a variety of forms of doll play, proposing the subversive methods of reskinning, rewriting, and unplaying.

In chapter 3, I examine the various ways in which board games have worked as critical documents and experiences, and discuss several artists' board games. I look at the spiritual practices of play and chance and how board games developed. I will also look at how board games reflect changes in society, for they also provide a window on the values, hopes, and beliefs of a given culture. The *Landlord* and *Anti-Monopoly* games, for example, showed how designers could invite player modifications to the games for mass-distributed, alternative game hacks.

I turn to language games in chapter 4. Puns and jokes, sound games, the historic methods of Simultanism and automatism, and the use of textual instructions and rules (including public disruptions) and embodiment are explored.

In chapter 5, I look at performative objects and games, including sculpture and photography, and study how critical game makers are approaching their games as physical interventions. Examining play that uses the body or the object in compelling ways, this chapter emphasizes collage, surrealist game methods, artists taking to the street with performative games, and the New Games Movement.

I explore locative games in chapter 6 as artistic practices expand to take play into environments in which player-participants can make meaning in public spaces. This chapter refers to play that is generally outside or in unusual locations, and examines the work of the Situationists and their method of the drift.

Chapter 7 focuses on artists' alternative computer-based games, including online and offline games. I provide an analysis of projects from Persuasive Games and those of Gonzalo Frasca, as well as other games created through the use of interventionist strategies in the design process.

To conclude, in chapter 8, I explore games for change, considering the ways in which activist concerns can be incorporated into game design. If a hypothesis for activist gaming is that a well-crafted approach to embedding certain ideologies (interventionist strategies) in design will have the capacity to alter the practices on both the part of conscientious designers and artists as well as the players, the goal of this chapter is to support makers who make real the systems that support an array of such choices. I conclude by discussing several methodologies for designing critical play as revealed in prior examples and analysis.

Rather than provide a comprehensive analysis of all games, this book aims to uncover some of the more interesting instances of artists' works where play and criticality manifest. Along the way, historical innovations in game play as they reflect social mores will be highlighted. The goal of *Critical Play* is to examine the ways in which individuals and groups involved in creating and playing games have worked, and are working within, social, political, and cultural systems. Their critical, radical play can be considered the avant-garde of the game as a medium.