



## ***Fun and Games – Playing to the Limits***

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[1] To play is human. Play is a social act of often-unclear boundaries. The delineation of playing as a special conditional form of doing or acting in the world relies upon registers of seriousness, authenticity, consequence and import, yet these registers are multivocal. Play can materialize and relativize banal affective and social relations. Play can imagine, insist on the possibility of, or suppress, difference. Play may provoke shock or distraction, conceal or reveal intention. Play may be encouraged or denied, rewarded or punished, feared, disdained, addictive, fatal.

[2] What becomes possible as a result of play in specific contexts? What socio-cultural relations are inscribed in the various sites of play? Are there limits to the social power of play, or limits to the social contexts in which playful acts may be asserted? Or is the very delineation of some actions as

play itself a limit on imagination and transformation? To what extent do the connotative associations of theatre, sport, or childhood constitute a limit on what is considered play? What is the role of play in science, industry, politics, or war? What associations can be traced between play and inductive, exploratory, or experimental knowledge generation?

[3] Developmental theories situate play in the process of accommodating to reality, whereby the child first assimilates difficult and incongruous aspects of reality by revisiting them with familiar schema. For Baudrillard, the reproduction of the 'real' risks eclipsing its truth-value (1981). These positions inscribe a vast territory populated by varying admixtures of representation and awe. Is play necessarily reactionary if it is absorbed into the normative and normalizing practices of (re)production and consumption? When are play and playfulness critical distractions to organized protest? Alternatively, how might simulation and virtual worlds unleash important re-imaginings and re-mappings of the social? What are the unique potentialities of play when engaged as formative, preliminary, inconsequential, non-serious, speculative, or exploratory?

[4] This special issue of *InTensions*, *Fun and Games: Playing to the Limits*, brings critical theorists and artists together to engage the relations between play, power, and social reproduction. The artworks and papers presented in

this issue variously clarify, complicate, and nuance our thinking about these relations.

[5] Our issue starts with Dubbels, who presents an analytic framework of coherence and ambiguity for distinguishing and designing for play. What is proposed here is a continuum between play, games, work, and threat. Potentially devastating to uncritical applications of gamification, Dubbels cautions that prescriptive activities can feel less like play and more like work: “an individual can be invited to play, but they cannot be made to play” (p. 1).

[6] Treading this delicate territory between work and play is the Flash game “Harmony” by Beaul, Ho, and Kwong, where coupled players battle the enemies of togetherness, such as apathy and distance. The ‘work’ in this game cycle is endless, as individual players’ advancement or failure is tied to gameplay levels of cooperation, empathy, and compromise.

[7] Selby’s essay “The Gibson Girl: A Reflection on Kite Flying” reads as an extended artist’s statement, troubling our parsing of toys from tools by revisiting the utilitarian history of the kite. The essay itself dips and weaves among tales of survival and rescue, artists and soldiers, radio and kites, employing a style of free association and surprising segues. Selby’s critical

reflection upon his kite-inspired artworks occupies an uncertain territory that mixes artistic formalism with historical reference. The essay, like the works considered, oscillates in figure and ground, formally and playfully manifesting the ambiguous relation of aesthetics and representation.

[8] The performance artwork "Demand Player Sovereignty" by Liz Solo features World of Warcraft players disrupting the uncritical reproduction of geopolitical conflict in the massive multiplayer online role playing game. The Third Faction, dedicated to cross-factional play, subverts WoW Terms of Service, particularly by thwarting the designed assignment of players to warring factions. This work of virtual activism compels reflection upon the problem of compliance and complacency with respect to the real world ordering of factions, the 'synthetic manufactured conflicts taking place on the world stage' (Solo).

[9] The relations between play and power and reality and fiction highlighted by the above works point to the intentionality behind manufactured experiences. In a recent paper "Change Through Rapprochement: Spatial Practices in Contemporary Performances," Jens Roselt has noted that "the production of spatial experiences is by no means prerogative of the theatre" (265). As aesthetic practices, spatial experiences occur in a variety of media and in everyday life. It is in this instance where "the everyday economy of

attention, encounters a theatrical aesthetic of perception” (265). Play situations are no exception to this observation.

[10] In “David Bowie is... Hyperreal,” Whittall critically explores the blurring of theatre and life in the hit museum exhibit David Bowie is..., drawing attention to the ironic situation of a postmodern cultural industry caught in the throes of self-referential celebration. Whittall sheds some light upon the conflicted nature of simulacra, having a ‘demonic’ aspect, in which it fails to assert a subversive breach in the ideological binary of copy and model. We become lost in familiar schema without recognizing that these same tropes are engaged precisely in our attempts to anchor the indeterminate. David Bowie is... a house of mirrors; we, as Whittall suggests “do not “enliven” the exhibit with our spectatorship’ but, are instead, comfortably complicit in co-opting a counter culture.

[11] Haglund’s critical history of Panamanian media coverage of the bouts of indigenous Dule boxer Baby San Blas highlights the symbolic reproduction of race relations in play, in this case the ring. Here, the contests between San Blas and his opponents stage a collision of cultures, marshaling shamanist and nationalist sentiments. Haglund traces the palimpsest of Dule resistance through the omissions and elisions of then contemporary newspaper reports.

[12] In "Simulacrum," a machima mashup of the real streets of New York City and Grand Theft Auto, Hudak portrays a mixed-reality landscape obscured by recursive signifiers. Inside the dreams and wanderings of the GTA protagonist we enter the artist's POV as he wanders the real streets of New York, recording through eye cam a landscape of media screens, and intermingling pedestrians and street performers. Reflexively denoting its own implementation of cinematic devices, "Simulacrum" restlessly seeks to ground its protagonist, portraying the city as a fusion of media, pop culture and to place, having multiple (virtual) frames of reference.

[13] The Second Life machinima "Land of Illusion" by Lily and Honglei, also mixes cinematic traditions with reflexive user-interface sounds, triggered by the artists typing input and navigating their virtual set. The interplay among the emerging conventions of virtual world performance and the language of film manifests a multiply framed formalism that parallels the accompanying time-travelling and culture spanning narrative sequences. At once, Land of Illusions layers contemporary aspirations for freedom of expression with China's golden age 'Hundred Schools of Thought.'

[14] We invite our readers to engage with these novel artworks and writings.

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