Designing for the Pleasures of Disputation

– or –

How to make friends by trying to kick them!

by Douglas Wilson

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Abstract

In this dissertation I explore what it might mean to design games that aim to nurture a spirit of *togetherness*. My central claim is that games which are intentionally designed to be confrontational, broken, or otherwise "incomplete" can help inspire a decidedly festive, co-dependent, and performative type of play. Appropriating the political theoretical work of Hannah Arendt, I argue that her concepts of "action" and "plurality" provide useful definitions of performance and togetherness as they relate to gameplay. Drawing on theories of embodied interaction, precedents from the contemporary art world, and various folk game movements, I grapple with the messy relationship between designed systems and sociocultural context. I describe how confronting this relationship head on opens up fruitful design opportunities. Taking seriously Dave Hickey's concept of "the pleasures of disputation," I explore how we players and designers might transmute the acrimony of conflict into something joyful.

Corrections

- In the Introduction and Chapter 3, I previously referred to Bernie DeKoven as a "self-described 'funologist'." Though DeKoven has used the term "funology" it does not seem as if he has ever called himself a "funologist." In my text, I have removed this descriptor and replaced it with the term "FUNcoach," which DeKoven has used on his own website.

- In two places in the Introduction, I previously suggested that Bernie DeKoven's philosophy "came out of" and was "derived" from the New Games movement. Though DeKoven would indeed go on to serve as a co-director of the New Games Foundation, much of his philosophy was inspired by earlier work with schoolchildren in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see DeKoven's website: http://www.deepfun.com/bernie, accessed August, 2012). I have corrected my text accordingly.

“It’s pitch black. I’m on a derelict barge in a backwater of Copenhagen harbor, and I’m trying to kick a girl.

Welcome to *Johan[n] Sebastian Joust*.”

– Chris Charla (2011)

Johann Sebastian Joust at the Arcade Boat exhibition, May 2011. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

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- Introduction -

Designing for the Pleasures of Disputation

Introduction – Designing for the Pleasures of Disputation

> *"It is critical for digital game designers and theorists to address the creative crisis in mainstream game development by examining the human element of what it means to truly play with other people, perhaps even more so than how to play games."*
>
> – Pearce et. al, (2007)

From the very beginning, Josh had built a reputation as a loose cannon. A wildcard.

Back in my college days, a group of my friends became obsessed with the popular parlor game Mafia (also known as Werewolf).[1] Mafia is a non-digital party game about psychology and paranoia. The basic idea is that a few chosen liars (the mafia) secretly work against the collective interests of the other players (the citizens). Players sit in a circle and embark on a witch hunt in which they try to deduce who is on the mafia team. No dice, no cards, no board; just accusations, arguments, and votes.

This brings us back to Josh, who was infamous for his maddeningly unpredictable style of play. The thing I remember most is how he would frequently lie about what role he had, even when he was on the citizen team. Without getting into the gory details of it, the particular kind of lie Josh would tell is a dangerous gambit.[2] More frequently than not, Josh's lies would doom his team to an insurmountable amount of confusion. Somewhat affectionately, we now refer to the gambit as "pulling a Josh."

From a tactical point of view, one could argue that Josh's lies were not altogether indefensible. Though perhaps poorly timed, his gambit could possibly be viewed as an advanced strategy.[3] However, I would argue that, for Josh, "strategy" was never really the point. As I understand it, Josh was simply trying to mess with us, and, in the process, try something unexpected – something we might all remember.

If this anecdote bears any testament, Josh was ultimately pretty successful in that endeavor. And yet, in our group of Mafia-playing friends, he wasn't an outlier. To the contrary, his antics came to symbolize the very spirit that sustained our Mafia sessions year after year. We became loose cannons all of us.

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[1] The game of Mafia was supposedly created by Russian psychology student Dimitry Davidoff in the late 1980s (see Robertson, 2010 for more background information). However, the specific rules my college friends and I used differ from Davidoff's original rules in a number of ways. In fact, my friends and I would routinely try different versions and invent our own rule modifications. As it turns out, there are innumerable different variations on the basic idea. Indeed, half the fun of the game is in experimenting with these kinds of "house rules." As such, it feels futile to cite any one ruleset here. For the purposes of my introduction, the key takeaway is that Mafia is a game in which some small minority of players is lying to the other players.

[2] As a citizen, Josh would frequently lie about having a special role (e.g. the doctor, the sheriff). This gambit is so dangerous because the real role-holder, if not familiar with advanced strategies, would likely assume that Josh is on the mafia team. This confusion not only reduces the pressure on the mafia players to make their own false role-claims, but also risks forcing the real role-holder to reveal themselves too early. (I should note that in our games the Moderator did *not* reveal the identity of a player when they were eliminated from the game).

[3] One could argue that such a false role-claim can, in the right situation, gives the real role-holder better cover (i.e. from a mafia kill). Or, thinking ahead to future games, the liar might hope to build themselves a wildcard reputation that would make them generally difficult to read.

For us, Mafia was never really about winning, or even remaining in the game. In fact, watching a game transpire (after being eliminated), with full knowledge of what was happening, was often more entertaining than playing the game itself. For us, Mafia was the perfect arena for us to out-impress each other. It was about being right, crafting the perfect lie, making the funniest argument, pulling off the craziest maneuver. In testing yourself against your peers, you could build yourself a reputation. You could disclose – and, moreover, *produce* – "who" you really were.

Was our predilection towards the game more indebted to its design, or to our particular personalities and needs? That's a tricky question. But whatever the reason, Mafia was the game that, for us, best nurtured the type of gameplay that we so desired – a type of gameplay in which our performances helped solidify our togetherness.

Figure 1 – A game of Mafia, 2005. (Photo by Alvin Chow).

Outline & Method

In this dissertation I explore what it might mean to design games that aim to nurture a spirit of *togetherness*. My central claim is that games which are intentionally designed to be confrontational, broken, or otherwise "incomplete" can help inspire a decidedly festive, co-dependent, and *performative* type of play. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that this type of play is somehow superior (morally or otherwise). However, I do believe that performative play (at least as I conceptualize it) remains somewhat under-explored by designers of digitally-mediated games.

The body of the dissertation consists of five chapters, originally written so that they could be published and read on their own. One article (Chapter 3) has already been published. As such, this dissertation should be viewed as an article-based compilation, rather than a tightly-integrated whole. Nevertheless, the introduction and the five body chapters do speak to one coherent collection of theoretical issues. To (somewhat cheekily) appropriate Hannah Arendt's term (as discussed below), I would argue that the five chapters comprise a *plurality*.

Throughout this dissertation, I grapple with the messy relationship between designed systems and sociocultural context. I describe how confronting this relationship head on opens up fruitful design opportunities. Pushing back against several more formalistic perspectives, I argue that the game studies and design theory literatures have sometimes privileged the personal at the expense of the *inter*personal. Drawing on theories of embodied interaction, precedents from the contemporary art world, and various folk games movements, I explain why one might want to conceptualize some games as *festive occasions*.

This project is primarily situated from a design perspective. It is anchored in the belief that the ways we talk about design, as well as the ways we *don't* talk about design, affect the games, objects, and systems we make. My hope is that articulating a different view on games and play provides a first step towards diversifying the kinds of things we design.

In all five chapters, I reflect upon games that I co-designed along with the Copenhagen Game Collective or with my studio, Die Gute Fabrik. As I explain at length in Chapter 1, I do *not* consider these games as a component of my research. My design work is done in a very different social context and is motivated by concerns that have little to do with my research. Methodologically speaking, the articles herein represent a collection of after-the-fact theoretical reflections, informed by various academic literatures. I choose to write about my own design work because I believe that there is something useful to be gleaned from someone who has "been there" throughout the entire development process, and who is able to describe those experiences post-facto within a relevant set of academic discourses.

Early on in the project, I considered collecting qualitative data on some of my games. As a trained humanist qua computer scientist, however, I soon realized that I was ill-equipped to collect and analyze such data. That type of social scientific work is certainly important, but lies outside the scope of this particular project. Situating my work more squarely in the general tradition of the humanities, my goal here is not to find a "true" formulation of games and play, but rather a productively evocative one.

In this introductory chapter, I try to define what I mean by "performative" gameplay and "togetherness." First, I review some of the literature on festivity, folk games, and play, and contemplate how we might begin to reconcile these more optimistic perspectives on togetherness with Richard Schechner's (1988) concept of "dark play." Second, I explore how notions of togetherness have been explored and critiqued within the contemporary art world. Third, appropriating the political theoretical work of Hannah Arendt (1958), I argue that her concepts of *action* and *plurality* provide useful definitions of performance and togetherness as they relate to gameplay. I end with a short outline of the five chapters that follow.

None of the five chapters explicitly reference the Arendtian theory I appropriate in this introduction. Nevertheless, my notions of performance and togetherness are core concepts that animate the work ahead. For over three years now, I have been grappling with Arendt's philosophical insights, piecing together my articulation of why her work matters to games and play. Although most of my own games were developed without any theory explicitly in mind, my design practice has undoubtedly drawn inspiration from the general "spirit" of Arendt's writings. In a sense, Arendt's concepts of action and plurality act as the invisible glue that holds this entire dissertation together.

Togetherness and Folk Games

Ideals of togetherness and camaraderie have long been central to the discourse around play, games, and festivity, and have been discussed extensively in various literatures.[4] Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) famously writes about these ideals in relation to his concept of *communitas*. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies them as "rhetorics of identity" – ways of thinking which position play as "forms of bonding" and "sanction for community" (p. 91). Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), inspired by French Renaissance author François Rabelais, dwells on the relationship between festivity and carnival. As Bakhtin characterizes it, carnival engenders a heightened awareness that the festivities are *unique* in time, thereby nurturing a special sense of "unity" among its revelers. This carnival spirit, set in fundamental opposition to the forces of hegemony, canon, and hierarchy, instead emphasizes "brotherhood, universalism, and antidogmatism" (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p.310).

In this dissertation, I focus on one particular aspect of festival culture – that of so-called *folk games*. Folk games serve as useful precedents for the ambiguous, often subversive games that I examine in the chapters ahead. Indeed, several of the game projects I discuss herein were inspired by particular folk games (see Chapters 3 and 4). My own stated goal of designing for togetherness echoes that of a variety of folk games practitioners both past and present.

The term "folk game" speaks to a diverse body of sports and games that eschew any one coherent genre. As sociologist Henning Eichberg (forthcoming) describes it, folk games typically connote "traditional, ethnic, or indigenous sports and games," but may also include "new activities that are based on traditional practices."[5] As I use the term, "folk game" suggests a relatively simple game played with commonly available equipment (a ball, a rope, dice, etc.) or no equipment all, such that the game can be easily spread by word of mouth. A defining feature of folk games, as I use the term, is that they facilitate "house rules" and player modification. They generally evolve over time, and are appropriated by different player communities in different ways. Often, they involve physical interaction between players. Examples include Duck-Duck-Goose, Freeze Tag, Ninja, and Mafia (as described in the introduction).

[4] Though I specifically focus on "togetherness" in this section, I should note that the concept of "performance" too has previously been explored in the literature on games and play. Clara Fernández Vara (2009), citing Richard Schechner's work on theater, ritual, and play, approaches performance as the enactment or "restoration" of a given script or behavior. Particularly resonant here is Schechner's (1985) claim that some performances are more "intense" than others. He writes: "Spectators are very aware of the moment when a performance takes off. A 'presence' is manifest, something has 'happened.' The performers have touched or moved the audience, and some kind of collaboration, collective special theatrical life, is born" (pp.10-11). This notion of a performance "taking off" and generating a collective energy speaks exactly to Josh's Mafia antics. Josh's loose cannon style operated on a certain *audaciousness* – a self-awareness of striving to do something beyond the typical game. Also relevant here is Schechner's (2002) description of performance as "showing doing," such that the activity itself is foregrounded. As Fernández Vara summarizes of Schechner's definition: "In performance, objects acquire a meaning and value during the performance that does not correspond with its value in the world outside of it" (p.60). The outstanding feature of Josh's performance, though, is that his actions acquired a meaning and value that did not correspond with their value in *the world of the game itself*. His antics bespoke a performing with performance itself.

[5] Eichberg (forthcoming) points out that the idea of a coherent "folk" is largely a modern invention. He specifies that "Folk sports as a concept did not exist before the industrial age, because there was neither 'sport' in the modern sense, nor did one use the notion of 'folk' with its modern connotations of collective cultural identity, nor did one place 'tradition' on a 'progressive' line of historical development." As Eichberg sees it, the notion of "folk games" mostly derives from the history of recreation and festivity of the "common people," as distinguished from aristocratic sports of the upper class (e.g. hunting, falconry, and fishing). In folk culture, games were often enjoyed at regional or seasonal celebrations, together with other forms of festivity like dances, music, and ritual.

Figure 2 – A game of Ninja at IndieCade 2010, Los Angeles. (Photo via IndieCade / Flickr).

Eichberg (2010), positioning folk games as "popular sport," defines them against the advent of "modern sport." Modern sport, as Eichberg depicts it, privileges *achievement* – the production of results and records, and the quantification of outcomes. It is this "ritual of the perfect achievement" (p. 171) that differentiates modern sport from other, more traditional forms of game and play. Popular sports, by contrast, are decidedly unserious. They "produce neither records nor heroes" (p. 110), and instead encourage all participants to get involved. Through physicality and laughter, the festivity of play and games engenders a special form of togetherness: "body-to-body contact and the interaction between 'I' and 'you'" (p. 193). As I discuss at length in Chapter 3, one particularly germane example is Eichberg's notion of the so-called "impossible game," such as the very physical Inuit folk game Iqiruktuk.

Increasing recognition of folk games as cultural practice has spurred a renewed interest in traditional games and folk sports. Across Europe, a number of associations and research programs have invested in preserving and promoting the traditional games of particular cultures (see Sutton-Smith, 1997; Eichberg, 2010). In some cases, these revivals have been motivated by a certain regionalism, promoting one type of identity over another (e.g. Breton versus French identity) (Eichberg, forthcoming). In other cases, traditional games have been reinvented in the pursuit of cultural development. In Denmark, for example, the Gerleve Legepark (Game Park) aims to provide an alternative learning space, uniting elements of "living museum, cultural history, educational innovation and tourism" (p.144, Eichberg, 2010).

In North America, folk sports and traditional games played a key role in shaping the "New Games" movement of the 1970s. Embodying various countercultural values of the time, the concept of New Games was very much predicated on the ideal of togetherness. One especially iconic example is Stewart Brand's Earthball, as debuted at his "World War IV" antiwar event in 1966. Earthball, played with a six-foot diameter ball painted after the planet Earth, features a simple ruleset. As Brand announced it: "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who want to push the Earth over the row of flags at that end of the field, and those who want to push it over the fence at the other end. Go to it" (as quoted in Fluegelman, 1976, p.9). Players were not assigned onto a team, but instead were able to decide for themselves what goal to pursue, if any. Indeed, some players even switched back and forth between teams. As New Games pioneer Andrew Fluegelman describes it, "The players had been competing, but not to win. Their unspoken and accepted agreement had been to play, as long and hard as possible" (p.9).

The central hope behind New Games was that this silly, deeply physical type of game would develop trust and cooperation, and also put players back in touch with their bodies. Pat Farrington, one of the organizers behind the first New Games Tournaments, has espoused the belief that games "are not so much a way to compare our abilities as a way to celebrate them" (as quoted in Fluegelman, p.10). Here, Farrington draws a clear binary between comparison and celebration – between competing against other people and competing against one's own limits. As Fluegelman tells it, the idea was that traditionally competitive games could be "restructured" in order to "emphasize play rather than winning" (p.12). In this sense, New Games can be understood as an *attitude* more than just a collection of particular games.

Another key component of the New Games conception of togetherness was the ideal of *diversity*. Based on their experiences running events in lower-income neighborhoods, the New Games organizers believed that play had the power to "cut across cultural boundaries" (p.16). For the Second New Games Tournament in 1974, organizers provided free charter busses from various urban centers to the event in Gerbode Preserve. In 1975, the Third Tournament was held right in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Radio spots and flyers, translated into different languages, announced: "We are coming together to celebrate our cultural, racial, social, and chronological differences" (p.18). Here again, the notion of togetherness takes on an explicitly political valence. As cultural historian Fred Turner (2006) observes: "to play New Games meant to imagine and perhaps to create a new social order" (p.108).

One of the most influential contemporary thinkers on folk games and festivity is self-described "FUNcoach" Bernie DeKoven.[6] In Chapter 3, I write extensively about DeKoven's (1978) notion of the "Well-Played Game," and discuss how and why we might apply his philosophy to the design of digitally-mediated play (see also Fron et. al, 2007; Pearce et. al, 2007; Pearce, 2009). As DeKoven sees it, the "excellence" of gameplay is not something that can be measured by results, but rather stems from the manner in which the game is interpreted, played, and modified – together. For DeKoven, maintaining a sense of togetherness is paramount. "Either we achieve it together," he admonishes, "or we don't achieve it at all" (p.7).[7] DeKoven emphasizes that the intention to play well together is something that must be continually reaffirmed. For this reason, he urges that we sometimes need to change a game – whether by a "well-timed cheat" or by switching to a different game entirely – in order to keep the play community going: "What is fair at one time or in one game may be inhibiting later on. It's not the game that's sacred,

[6] DeKoven had used the descriptor "FUNcoach" on his website. See for example: http://www.deepfun.com/about.php (accessed August, 2012).

[7] DeKoven, like the New Games progenitors, specifically celebrates a mantra of diversity. The original book cover for *The Well-Played Game* (1978), for instance, features an illustration of people of different races and genders, all playing together. He argues: "Play is something that can bring people together, that can create community out of strangers, because it's a universally shared experience" (DeKoven, 2011).

it's the people who are playing" (p.53). In essence, DeKoven's argument is that games themselves should never be allowed to take precedence over the community of people playing.[8]

This dissertation, as well as my own personal design philosophy, draws heavily on these various perspectives on festivity, folk games, and togetherness. That said, there are a number of reasons why we might take a more critical view on these general ideas. Arguably, the ideal of the so-called "play community" carries with it a collectivism that risks subjugating the needs of the individual. Bakhtin (1968), for instance, writing about the collectivity experienced during carnival, depicts a dissolution of the individual: "The individual feels he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself" (p.255). Despite Bakhtin's enthusiasm about the transformative power of carnival life, we might worry here that the "softer" social rules of the community can be just as draconian as the stated rules of the game.[9]

It should be noted that DeKoven, in his defense, does attempt to account for the needs of individual players. His notion of "coliberation" (a play on the word "collaboration"), for instance, represents an attempt to balance "me" with "we" – to find a sweet spot between the dangers of alienation and conformity (DeKoven, 2011). On this point, DeKoven stresses the importance of allowing players to quit when they feel like it: "We've accepted the responsibility to include you when you want to be included, but, in so doing, we've also given you the responsibility to do what you want to be doing" (p.83). Yet despite these qualifications, it is clear that DeKoven's philosophy, like the New Games movement, stands as an overwhelmingly *optimistic* perspective.

[8] Explaining his philosophy of "junkyard sports," DeKoven (2005) writes in favor of "throwaway" games – games that arise out of a particular moment or context. For DeKoven, the focus is not on particular sports themselves, but rather on activities that facilitate the invention of new sports. He writes: "Junkyard sports are opportunities to create new, funny sports for which winning isn't the point. Playing together is" (p. xi). Eichberg likewise emphasizes the characteristically ephemeral nature of folk games and festivity. Eichberg (2010, forthcoming), writing about the "folklorization" of traditional sports and "objectification" of festivals, warns that festivity "can be colonised as part of societal over-investment into products, commodities, things and systems" (2010, p.118). Eichberg's point is that labeling a particular game and exhibiting it in some "official" capacity risks ossifying the game as a stable activity rather than recognizing it as a social *practice* that is continually adapted and renegotiated. He writes: "Festivity is an existential meeting where human beings create a fugitive experience here and now. The situation will be powerful through and for togetherness – and it will disappear tomorrow, fading away in a pale memory" (p.119).

[9] Within the literature on computer games, this worry – that social pressures bring with them a problematic conformism – has been famously expressed by David Myers (2010). Writing about massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), Myers is concerned that socially oriented group play is more "repressive" than individual play – play that is idiosyncratic, oppositional, and competitive. He criticizes: "'Productive' social play in MMOs would channel individual play into forms that are stable, predictable, and comfortable but also less diverse and less accurate in determining game values based on oppositional relationships. Therefore, currently popular MMO game designs, particularly those promoting cooperative play, operate most fundamentally as a means of social control – and this function must be weighed heavily against their more productive outcomes" (p.131). Echoing Schechner's notion of "dark play" (see below), he concludes: "A virtual world that traps, regulates, and purposefully distorts the overtly selfish behavior of individuals—including, prominently, play—appears to be a well-built bottle for one of our most destructive and most useful genies. I would hesitate to trap that genie permanently inside" (p.162). I certainly concur with this sentiment, and agree that we should be careful not to uncritically valorize social play. However, the crucial limitation of Myers's account is that he laments this tension without adequately addressing how we might productively face it. Instead, he seems to suggest that we might avoid the worst of these social pressures if only we honored the game rules as provided in code. By contrast, my own games (as explored in this dissertation) aim to *foreground* the tension in order to deal with it – even if it can never be fully "solved."

Figure 3 – Bernie DeKoven shows the original book cover for *The Well-Played Game* (1978) at DiGRA 2011 in Hilversum, Holland. (Photo via Michiel Rotgans / Utrecht School of the Arts).

Figure 4 – Collaborative games with Bernie DeKoven at DiGRA 2011 in Hilversum, Holland. (Photo via Michiel Rotgans / Utrecht School of the Arts).

Optimism isn't necessarily a bad thing, but we should be careful not to romanticize away the "cruel" side of play (see Sutton-Smith, 1983). As Sutton-Smith (1997) reminds us, rhetorics of identity are often tied up with rhetorics of power. Games, play, and festivity are frequently employed in the service of factionalism or political symbolism. The "togetherness" forged through festive play can also speak to enactments of group fantasy or jingoistic assertions of superiority. Indeed, it is precisely this dual nature of play that motivates Eichberg to define "popular sport" against "modern sport," Bakhtin to champion "joyful relativity" over fixed hierarchies, and DeKoven to distinguish "play communities" from the "game communities." All three theorists search out a "healthier," more sustainable kind of play.

Yet it can also be productive to *embrace* the inherent "danger" of play, or at least confront it head-on. On this point, Richard Schechner's (1988) notion of "dark play" (as I discuss in Chapter 5) offers us an evocative counterpoint.[10] As Schechner describes it, dark play operates on the thrill of "playing with fire" and "going in over one's head" (p.5). Though participants "may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused" (p.5), dark play "need not be overtly angry or violent" (p.13). Schechner relates an example from one of his students who, despite the pleas of her concerned family members, decided to perform an arabesque while teetering over the edge of waterfall. As the student tells it, it was precisely her family members' anxiety that "sharpened" the experience of danger and beauty.

Schechner's notion of dark play is heavily influenced by the Sanskrit concept of *maya-lila*, which "rejects Western systems of rigid, impermeable frames, unambiguous meta-communications, and rules inscribing hierarchical arrangements of reality" (p.11). In some sense, then, Schechner's formulation resonates with Bakhtin's aversion to hierarchy, as well as with the "do it yourself" values of the New Games movement. The difference is that Schechner focuses on the personal and *private* experience of play: "Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification" (p.13). In contrast to the ideal of community, dark play recognizes that players (and also directors, spectators, and commentators) are frequently at cross-purposes with one another.

Still, I'd like to suggest that the notion of dark play and the general ideal of togetherness may not actually be so irreconcilable. Contrary to Schechner's suggestion, the idea of communal festivity need not suggest any clean kind of "resolution" or "integration." For example, Bakhtin frames festivity in relation to the *grotesque*. He famously argues against narrow conceptions of "the folk" which attempt to sanitize away subversiveness and blasphemy (Clark and Holquist, 1984). Eichberg (2010), likewise, argues that laugher and the grotesque express a "deep recognition" of human *failure*: "The fool and the carnival are images of things going 'wrong' in life" (p.167). As I argue below, "togetherness" is not a stable resolution, but is rather something that must be continually earned and reaffirmed. This understanding echoes Schechner's depiction of play as "continuous creative-destruction process" (p.3).

The game design philosophy I outline in the chapters ahead can be viewed as a middle position between the optimism of the New Games movements and Schechner's harder-edged "provisionality." Like DeKoven (and others), I believe that performative play can nurture a rewarding form of togetherness.

[10] A related idea here is the concept of "bleed," as explored by various freeform role-playing game traditions. Markus Montola (2010), writing about extreme role-play in the Nordic region, explains that bleed is term used to describe the blurring between a player's feelings and the feelings of the fictional character they are role-playing. In a number of experimental Nordic role-playing games, bleed is used to facilitate the exploration of negative emotions and difficult social situations. Montola observes that "bleed players pretend to believe that *this is just a game*, holding on to the alibi while forfeiting some of the protection" (p.2, emphasis his). For more on experimental Nordic role-playing games, see Stenros and Montola, 2010. In my own work, I have previously written about bleed as it relates to the notion of "abusive game design" (Wilson and Sicart, 2010).

That said, my own games try to temper this optimism with a dose of cruelty and self-awareness. Drawing on notions of "abusive" game design (see Wilson and Sicart, 2010), "dialogic" game design (as discussed in Chapter 2), and agonist political philosophy (see below), the games discussed herein often take on a somewhat "punk" attitude in order to foreground the *adversarial*.

Admittedly, these kinds of self-consciously "agonistic" games can easily turn sour. Yet as I argue in Chapter 3, it is precisely because these games can go wrong that it feels so rewarding when we manage to keep them going "right." Following Schechner, the insight here is that the intractable contingency of play is sometimes its main attraction. From a design standpoint, the hope is that a potent dose of *agon* will help remind us that we won't always see eye to eye – that togetherness is something hard-earned.[11]

Contemporary Art, Conviviality, and "Relational Agonism"

Beyond folk games, the contemporary art world too offers useful precedents for thinking about these issues of togetherness, aesthetics, and social interaction. One particularly relevant discussion here is Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) theory of "relational aesthetics" and its subsequent critiques.

Bourriaud, identifying certain trends in contemporary installation art, champions the idea that artists might user their work to generate social relationships, fostering a more collective elaboration of meaning. For Bourriaud, the term "relational art" describes an art that "[takes] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" (p.14). As Claire Bishop (2004) summarizes, relational art inverts the goals of twentieth century formalism: "Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience" (p.54).

An iconic example here is the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija.[12] Tiravanija is perhaps best known for a series of installations in which he turned art galleries into a makeshift kitchens and hangout spaces, cooking curries for those who attended. Especially famous is his 1996 piece *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*, in which he reconstructed his New York apartment in the Kolnischer Kunstverein gallery. The installation, including a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and living room, was made open to the public twenty-four hours a day, as a space of "intercultural exchange" (as quoted in Kester, 2004, p.105). As Bishop tells it, the exhibition was accompanied by a considerable amount of euphoric rhetoric. The curator, for example, made the claim that "this unique combination of art and life offered an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody" (as quoted in Bishop, 2004, p.57). In this way, the hopes pinned to Tiravanija's work (and other art like it) echo those associated with folk games, as described above.

According to Bourriaud, relational artworks like Tiravanija's installations nurture an important type of *conviviality* in a world where social relationships have become too predictable, too constrained by new "truncated channels of communication" (p.26). Relational art doesn't just "address" its viewers; it also hopes to give them, as Bishop summarizes, "the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be" (p.54). Rejecting ambitious revolutionary or utopian projects, Bourriaud argues that we might still be able to achieve more modest *micro-utopias* – "interstices opened up in the social corpus" (p.70). As Bourriaud sees it, relational art is centrally informed by concerns of *democracy*.

[11] *Agon* is one of four play types famously classified by French theorist Roger Caillois (1958). The term describes play oriented towards competition, whether physical or cerebral in character. Caillois contrasts the competitiveness of *agon* with *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo).

[12] Some other artists Bourriaud features in his description of relational aesthetics include Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Liam Gillick, Phillippe Parreno, Vanessa Beecroft, and Carsten Höller.

Figure 5 – One of Rirkrit Tiravanija's "soup kitchens," as part of his 2011 exhibition *Fear Eats the Soul*, in New York City. (Photo by L. Streeter / Art Observed).

There are a number of compelling reasons why we might be critical of Bourriaud's use of the term "democracy," and skeptical of installations like Tiravanija's gallery hangouts. Grant Kester (2004), for instance, calls attention to the controversy that surrounded Tiravanija's 1996 exhibition in Cologne. While Tiravanija was sharing his reconstructed apartment with the art-going public, the Cologne police were evicting a settlement of homeless people in a nearby neighborhood. As Kester recounts, a number of artists and activists took issue with the stark juxtaposition between Tiravanija's carefully monitored art exhibition and police attacks on local residents. The point is not that Tiravanija was somehow responsible for the police brutality, but rather that this juxtaposition so clearly exposed the mismatch between the lofty rhetoric around the installation and the more mundane reality of its limited scope. Bishop notes that artworks like Tiravanija's installation, though they claim to defer to context, do not "question their imbrication within it" (p.65). This type of relational art piece, so focused on the gallery, fails to examine its relationship with the broader sociocultural and political contexts in which it is situated.

Hal Foster (2004), in his critique of relational aesthetics, observes that relational art often seems to pursue sociability for its own sake, "as though the very idea of community has taken on a utopian tinge" (p.194). Bishop points out that the *quality* of the relationships produced by such installations is seldom called into question. She asks: "If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (p.65). A potential problem, then, for artists like Tiravanija is that relational artworks are so often addressed to a predictable community of attendees who already share common interests and identity with one another. As such, we might question how democratic these installations really are. As Bishop argues, "The content of this dialogue is not in itself democratic, since all questions return to the hackneyed nonissue of 'is it art?'" (p.68).

Though Bourriaud's notion of micro-utopias promises a goal more modest and achievable, his concept of democracy still comes across as naïve. As Foster criticizes, relational art pieces – often presented in "rosy terms" – tend "to drop contradiction out of dialogue, and conflict out of democracy" (p.195). Bishop, drawing from political theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, argues that a democratic society is one which *encourages* disagreements, not one which tries to sweep them under the rug. In this view, Bourriaud's depiction of "democracy" is overly sanitized because the micro-utopias he describes (and which relational artists try to build) lack any significant friction or tension. Bishop contends that, in such an insular setting as a contemporary art gallery, an installation like Tiravanija's already "circumscribes the outcome in advance" (p.69). Kester, likewise, questions the value of dialogue for its own sake, and instead emphasizes "the extent to which the artist is able to catalyze emancipatory insights *through* dialogue" (p.69). The point here is that democracy is not something immanent, but rather is *earned*.

As a counterbalance to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, Bishop proposes an alternative notion of "relational antagonism." She points to artists like Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, both of whom try to engender feelings of *estrangement* – "sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging" (p.70). Sierra is famous for his somewhat controversial installations in which he remunerates laborers (for example, refugees) to perform a pointless or demeaning task. In his 2001 Venice Biennale piece, *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*, Sierra paid illegal street vendors to have their hair dyed blonde. Bishop argues out that the performance, beyond the obvious symbolism about capitalism, exploitation, and complicity, left more tangible traces. The bleached hair ended up serving as a lingering reminder of social and economic division, calling attention to the laborer-performers wherever they were encountered by the Biennale attendees. Some of Hirschhorn's works revolve around similar attempts to highlight difference. His 2002 piece, *Bataille Monument*, had viewers taxi away from the main *Documenta XI* venues in Kassel, out to three makeshift installations in the suburb of Nordstadt. As Bishop tells it, the installations made visitors "feel like hapless intruders" (p.76) in a neighborhood situated by two housing projects. Rather than build a community identity, Hirschhorn's piece served to *destabilize* any such pretense, questioning, Bishop claims, what it might even mean to be a "fan" of art.

In contrast to the more optimistic, "feel-good" stance taken by artists like Tiravanija, Bishop's relational antagonism calls attention to the awkwardness and discomfort of our differences. In this view, the strength of Sierra's and Hirschhorn's work is that they refuse to smooth over this awkwardness, instead offering an experience of "pointed racial and economic nonidentification: 'this is not me'" (p.79). For Bishop, relational antagonism demonstrates "better democracy" (p.77) because it foregrounds existing tensions instead of pretending that we can reconcile them so harmoniously. Her claim is that this type of antagonistic art pushes us to rethink and not just celebrate our relationships with one another.

Like Schechner's "dark play" (discussed above), Bishop's relational antagonism offers a usefully provocative corrective to overly sanitized perspectives on aesthetic experience and togetherness. Bishop is certainly right to warn us against art that slips into the self-congratulatory. Arguably, part of the problem here is that artists like Tiravanija are simply underwhelming exemplars. As Bishop points out, a piece like *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* is too focused on a specific gallery-going public, and fails to challenge its viewers in any serious way. Though I agree with that criticism, I'd also argue that Bishop fails to recognize the more redeemable fragments of Bourriaud's account. His wording might be unfortunate, but Bourriaud's notion of "micro-utopias" is, at heart, a laudable ideal. The fact is that conviviality, whether achieved with friends or with strangers, can be deeply rewarding – *especially* when contingent and hard-earned. Bourriaud's modifier "micro" aims to foreground this provisionality.

Bishop's relational antagonism is ultimately too nihilistic, throwing the proverbial baby out with the proverbial bathwater.[13] Her resignation to the supposed impossibility of micro-utopias echoes Sierra's pessimistic assertion that "There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work" (as quoted in Bishop, 2004, p.71). Yes, it's important to realize that we will never fully reconcile our differences, but there's no reason why we can't still *aspire* to some degree of conviviality.[14] Bishop's critical error is that she fails to distinguish antagonism from *agonism*. In championing antagonism, Bishop misreads the political theory on which she bases her argument. Chantal Mouffe (2005), writing about conflict and democracy, emphasizes the difference between "enemies" and "adversaries":

> While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. [...] We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism (p.20).

Mouffe's important insight here is that antagonism, left untransformed, actually works *against* the practice of democracy. The crucial limitation of Bishop's relational antagonism, therefore, is that it makes no effort to account for how confrontation might be regulated in ways acceptable to everyone involved. I contend that a more ambitious creative practice would do more than merely highlight our differences; it would foreground how we might also address and manage those differences.[15] As Kester puts it: "We are all too familiar with the ways in which communication can fail; [...] what we urgently need are models for how it can succeed" (pp.8-9).[16]

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[13] This argument is deeply indebted to a series of conversations I had with my good friend and artist Matt Broach.

[14] I do agree with Bishop that subjects are divided and incomplete – that identity, as I argue below, is not something stable or antecedent, but *performed*. Yet Bishop mistakenly assumes that the ideal of community-as-togetherness requires "unified subjects" (p.79). As Kester argues, subjectivity is continually formed *through* discourse: "While we can never expect to grasp the essence of another human consciousness in its entirety, a dialogic aesthetic requires that we strive to acknowledge the specific identity of our interlocutors and conceive of them not simply as subjects on whose behalf we might act but as co-participants in the transformation of both self and society" (p.79).

[15] One relevant example here is the performance art of Marina Abramović. In Chapter 2, I describe how Abramović frequently places herself and her audience in deliberately awkward or difficult situations. For Abramović, this confrontational stance is ultimately a means to evoking a response of empathy. The goal behind her self-inflicted suffering is to a build a visceral kind of emotional connection between her, her collaborators, and her viewers.

[16] Kester's (2004) theory of "dialogical aesthetics" offers another compelling model. Echoing ideals from participatory design traditions (see Taylor, 2006), Kester surveys a variety of artists whose community-based practices take as their starting point the specific needs and requirements of all the stakeholders involved. As Kester sees it, dialogical artworks aren't just made "for" particular groups, they're made *with* those groups. Far from sanctioning the insularity of installations like Tiravanija's gallery hangouts, Kester writes in favor of working with groups who "have struggled to define their political identity and interests prior to the process of collaborative production" (p.161). The hope is that artists and community members will be able to leverage their exposed differences in the service of building empathy and identification. This dissertation, though influenced by Kester's work (see Chapter 4), examines a set of design practices that are less "participatory" and more explicitly agonistic.

On this point, I'd like to suggest that games offer one promising such alternative. Games and sport enjoy a widespread relevance dwarfing that of the contemporary art gallery. Admittedly, designing a new game that is both accessible and widely appealing is no trivial task. Nevertheless, the overwhelming popularity of games and sport speaks to their capacity to attract the type of diverse public upon which democratic interaction thrives. Beyond the world of installation art, games stand out as one very familiar source of aesthetic experience where enemies are recast into adversaries, and antagonism is transformed into agonism.[17] To be clear, I don't mean to suggest that games are somehow a "superior" alternative than installation art, or that all games inherently and productively foreground issues of democracy. The point is rather that games might provide one evocative jumping off point for addressing these issues.

Taking seriously the political theoretical ideal of agonistic plurality, the games I discuss in the chapters ahead all try to *accentuate* this inherently adversarial nature of gameplay. *Dark Room Sex Game*, as discussed in Chapter 2, deliberately aims to embarrass its players. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as discussed in Chapter 3, pushes its players to roughhouse and cheat one another. It also coaxes them into playing the fool. *Johann Sebastian Joust*, as discussed in Chapter 4, is a highly physical dueling game more outwardly aggressive than the project I had originally set out to make. Its game system is intentionally open-ended in an attempt to encourage players to negotiate the rules and improvise new ones. *Fuck You, It's Art!*, as discussed in Chapter 5, was designed as a glorified excuse for players to yell profanities at one another. In short, the design ethos articulated in this dissertation *embraces* an aesthetic of conflict. These games all hope to playfully remind their players that togetherness is always provisional, never a given.

Dave Hickey (1997), writing about the relationship between art and democracy, makes a case for why such an agonistic attitude is healthy for culture more generally. For Hickey, the art world is a form of "participatory republic" in which its participants vie to increase the social value of the things they love. In this view, works of art are "candidates, aspiring to represent complex constituencies" (p.205). For this reason, Hickey argues, it is essential that the "value" of art always remain problematic; that some artworks be allowed to *fail*, publicly and demonstrably; and that we all continue to challenge each other's views. In this spirit, Hickey goes out of his way to *welcome* disagreement and provocation:

> So, I'll tell you what I would like. I would like some bad-acting and wrong-thinking [...] I would like a bunch of twenty-three-year-old troublemakers to become so enthusiastic, so noisy, and so involved in some stupid, seductive, destructive brand of visual culture that I would feel called upon to rise up in righteous indignation, spewing vitriol, to bemoan the arrogance and self-indulgence of the younger generation and all of its artifacts. Then I would be really working, really doing my thing, and it would be so *great!* (p.209).

Hickey's articulation here is so valuable because it shows us how we might reframe disputation not as an obstacle to somehow overcome, but as a beautiful cacophony to be savored and managed. Looking beyond the dubious optimism of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and the pessimism of Bishop's relational antagonism, I'd like to suggest that we might instead talk about a *relational agonism*.

[17] I do not mean to suggest that installation art and games are mutually exclusive categories. To the contrary, many contemporary artists have appropriated classic games or invented new ones. Fluxus artists like Takako Saito and Yoko Ono, for instance, famously produced modifications of chess (Higgins, 2002; Flanagan, 2009). More generally, many Fluxus performances and scores can arguably be viewed as experiments in games and play. For a sampling of classic Fluxus scores, see Friedman, Smith, and Sawchyn, 2002. For an extensive and broader discussion of the use of games within contemporary art practice, see Flanagan, 2009.

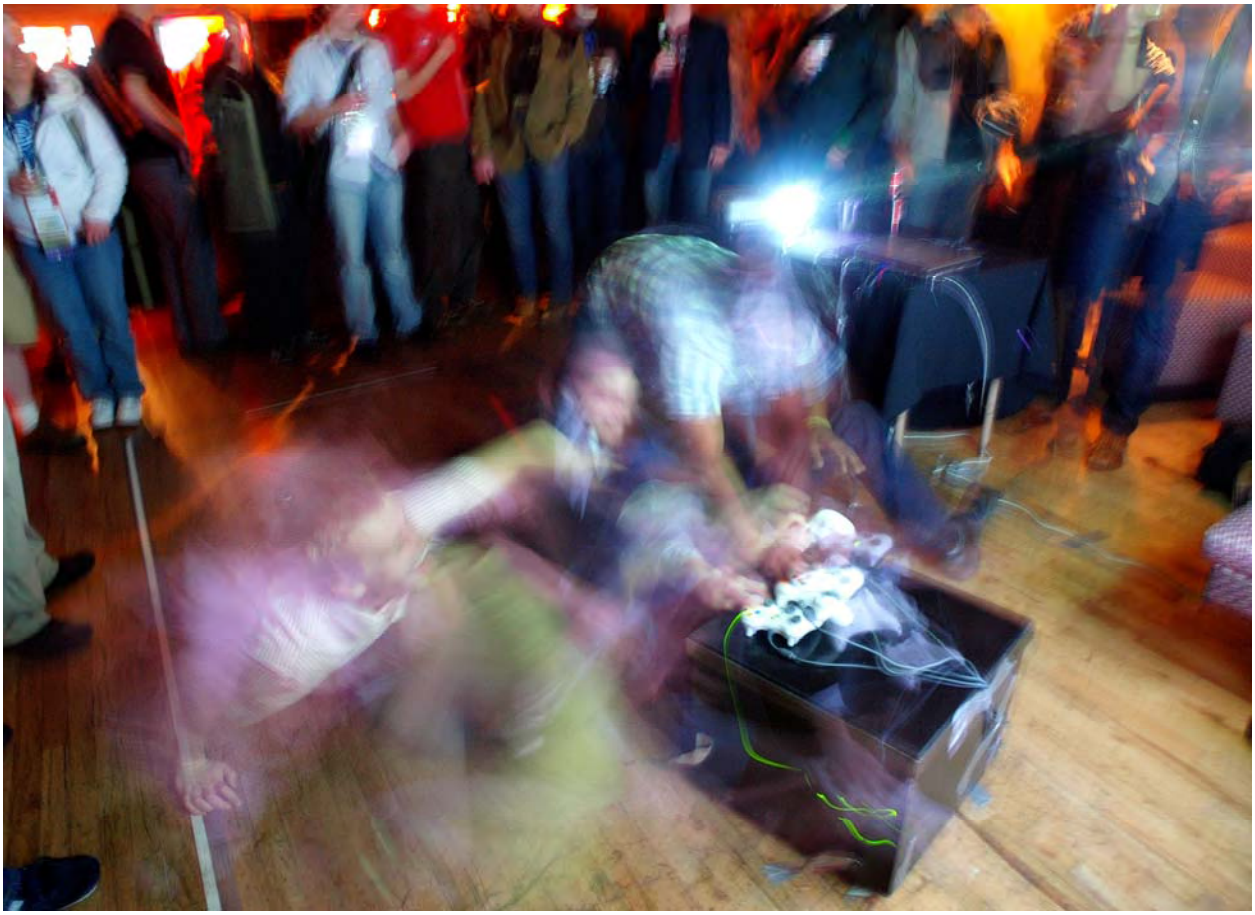

Figure 6 – Players wrestle around on the floor while playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* at the GAMMA IV party, San Francisco, 2010. (Photo via Official GDC 2010 Flickr stream).

Plurality, Arendtian Action, and Gameplay

Hickey, riffing off his notion of art practice as participatory republic, famously applies some of these same ideas to a discussion of sport, games, and spectatorship. In an essay entitled "The Heresy of Zone Defense," Hickey (1997) reflects on a legendary moment from the 1980 NBA Finals in which the Seventy-Sixers' Julius "Doctor J" Erving, driving to the basket against the Lakers' Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, managed to score an acrobatic and memorably creative layup. Hanging in mid-air and facing Abdul-Jabbar's outstretched arms, Erving shielded the ball *behind* the backboard, only to lay it in up and around from the other side. The shot is so legendary in part because it appropriated the rules of basketball in a way that few people had ever considered before. Hickey singles out the play as a prime example of the kind of creativity enabled by "liberating" rules and constraints. Henry Lowood (2010), speaking about digital games and e-sports, looks to Erving's shot as a classic instance of so-called "beautiful" play.

Figure 7 – Julius Erving's famous behind-the-backboard layup, in the 1980s NBA Finals. (Photo by Manny Millan/Sports Illustrated).

For my purposes, I would like to focus on two particular aspects of Erving's layup. First, the shot highlights both the personal and the interpersonal qualities of play, simultaneously. As Hickey puts it, moves like Erving's layup are "*personal* solutions" (emphasis his) because "my basketball is not your basketball, and you are not me" (p.161). At the same time, the shot foregrounds the interaction *between* players, given that Erving's acrobatics were only necessitated in the face of Abdul-Jabbar's defense. Hickey writes: "the play was as much his as it was Erving's since it was Kareem's perfect defense that made Erving's instantaneous, pluperfect response to it both necessary and possible" (pp.155-156). This "convergence between effort and resistance," as Lowood phrases it, arises out of competition – out of an agonistic contest between two equally matched opponents. Second, the "greatness" of the shot ultimately resides in its *resonance* through the world of basketball. The play itself, Hickey argues, is less relevant than "the *joy* attendant upon Erving's making it" (p.155, emphasis his). This resonance is at once something more ephemeral and more lasting than the identifiable achievement of the play as viewed in isolation. As Lowood describes beautiful play: "as soon as the play unfolds, it has begun to disappear, only to be re-configured in the spectators' memory and imagination."

I'd like to suggest that play communities too, like art practice, can productively be viewed as a form of participatory republic. Following Hickey, we might frame this coming-together through *agon* and memorable performance as an issue of democracy – as a "mode of social discourse [...] an accumulation of small, fragile, social occasions that provide the binding agent of fugitive communities" (p.154). Inspired by the political theoretical literature on agonism (as discussed above), I contend that the 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt offers a usefully evocative framework for thinking through these issues of togetherness, performance, and gameplay. In particular, Arendt's respective ideals of *plurality* and *action* provide excellent articulations of what I mean by "togetherness" and "performative play."[18]

Arendt (1958), drawing inspiration from early antiquity, Socratic, and Aristotelian worldviews, famously identifies three fundamental types of human activity: labor, work, and action. "Labor," defined by Arendt as "man's metabolism with nature" (p.118), describes the maintenance of life (e.g. eating, sexual reproduction). Driven by biological necessity, labor resides "outside the range of willful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes" (p.106). Concerned with the fulfillment of individual needs, it is an inherently *private* activity. Arendt deems labor "unproductive" because its products are "consumed," and do not last. More colloquially, labor can be understood as a rote "getting by." Hanna Pitkin (1981) reframes Arendt's concept of labor as an *attitude* more than a literal activity. As Pitkin sees it, labor operates under a slavishly consumptive mentality that assumes "we are the helpless products of causal forces, historical or social, which leave us no choice or capacity for initiative" (p.340).

"Work" refers those activities pertaining to the "artificial" world of use objects. Unlike labor, which is part of a cyclical and never-ending life process, work features a "definite beginning and a definite, predictable end" (Arendt, 1958, p.143). Work is decidedly *instrumental*, concerned with means that will accomplish particular ends. Arendt deems it "productive" because its products provide the stability and durability upon which the human world is based. As Pitkin characterizes it, Arendt's concept of work speaks to an attitude of "technical efficiency" and a concern for "expedient utility" (p.340).

"Action," finally, stands as the keystone concept of Arendt's political philosophy. It describes a type of activity that is motivated neither by the necessity of labor nor the utility of work. In action – which Arendt specifies is fundamentally intertwined with *speech* – men strive to distinguish themselves from one another and to accomplish unique deeds. As such, Arendtian action suggests a form of virtuosity. This striving for greatness, co-dependent on an audience of peers, is an inherently *public* endeavor. Drawing inspiration from the "fiercely agonal spirit" (p.41) of the Ancient Greek *polis* (city-state), Arendt observes that action requires "the surrounding presence of others" (p.188) against whom to measure up. For Arendt, action is what defines the *political*.[19] Indeed, it is "the political activity par excellence" (p.9).

[18] We should acknowledge that Arendt's work, which grapples with the aftermath of World War II and the looming threat of the atomic bomb, is motivated by a particularly high set of stakes. Nevertheless, I would argue that the generality and rigor of Arendt's argumentation makes her philosophy a usefully rich site for design inspiration. The specificity of her terminology provides an evocatively poetic framework for thinking about issues in game design.

[19] Arendt emphasizes the difference between the political and what she identifies as the "social." As Arendt depicts it, the social is a condition of modern society, and speaks to a problematic blurring of private and public realms. She argues that society has brought with it a troubling *conformism*, not equality. In modern society, political action is replaced by a kind of uncritical "behavior." Reflecting on the nature of mass society, she worries that "large numbers of people, crowded together, develop and almost irresistible inclination towards despotism, be this the despotism of a person or of majority rule" (p.43). Instead, Arendt seems to prefer the tight-knit, more definitively public nature of the political. Key to Arendt's distinction here is that her concept of the political, unlike that of the social, accounts for the fact men might act with respect to *each other* and not just by predictable patterns of behavior ("economic man"). In this chapter, I use the word "social" in its more colloquial sense, not in the Arendtian sense.

Despite the agonal nature of this public and political exchange – and indeed, partly *because* of this agonal spirit – action is characteristically collective, shared, and, as Pitkin argues, deliberate.[20] In this sense, we might also understand Arendtian action (as compared to labor and work) to be an attitude of *mindfulness*. Yet this mindfulness does not imply that action can be fully planned or controlled. To the contrary, action is inherently risky; because it is unprecedented, its outcome and consequences are unpredictable. It is precisely the utter contingency of action that gives it its stakes. As Bonnie Honig (1993) summarizes, when Arendtian action works, it is not "in spite of but partly because of the risk, infelicity, and dissemination" (p.92). Arendt argues that it is this contingency that makes action seem *miraculous*. As she so poignantly phrases it, action is the "infinite improbability which occurs regularly" (p.246).

Applied as a theoretical tool, Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action provides an evocative frame for thinking about the different ways in which players engage games. We might use Arendtian labor, for instance, to describe a type of uncritical playing by habit or tradition, or play that focuses primarily on keeping oneself in the game. Work, meanwhile, speaks to a highly technical, instrumentalist approach to gameplay – say, the careful planning and execution of a strategy. In this sense, the Arendtian concept of work resonates with so-called "rational" play (see Smith, 2006). Alternatively, work might describe sportive or personally expressive forms of play aimed at the production of achievements (e.g. a high score) and other more tangible artifacts (e.g. a speed run) that stand out on their own.

Action, by contrast, speaks to a more self-revelatory type of performance. Key to Arendt's philosophy is her distinction between *who* a person is and *what* that person is. She stresses that it is only through speech and action that people disclose "who they really and inexchangably were" (p.41) as opposed to the "qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings" (p. 179) that comprise "what" they are. Moreover, this disclosure is not just an expression of something or someone that already exists. Crucially, action also *produces* identity. Honig, drawing from J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterance, emphasizes that Arendt's "who" is not something stable or "constative." Action, like performance utterances, "draw[s] our attention to the other-than-referential character of language, to its extra-communicative power, to its creation, in effect, of 'new relations and realities,' to its constitution of speaking subjects who are not quite present to themselves" (p.89).[21] This articulation resonates with my earlier description of how my friend Josh, through the game of Mafia, was able to build (or rather, perform) himself a *reputation*.

That we are not quite "present" to ourselves explains why action is an inherently *inter*personal endeavor. Arendtian action is directly predicated on the idea that our identity is only disclosed to us (and indeed, *produced*) by interacting with a *plurality* of people who view the world differently than we do. Arendt writes: "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (p.50). In short, identity is fundamentally relational. In respect to play and

[20] Honig is more skeptical of the "deliberateness" of action. She writes: "Often political action comes to us, it involves us in ways that are not deliberate, willful, or intended, in ways that cannot be fully captured or captivated by agent-centered accounts. Action produces its actors; episodically, temporarily, we are its performative production" (p.120). I agree that Arendtian action often contains an element of serendipity, but I would argue that Honig's phrasing underestimates our role as instigators. One might say that we "invite" action by adopting an attitude of willingness.

[21] Honig's reading of Arendtian action here resonates with Todd Harper's (2010) work on game culture and "performativity." Harper, whose ethnographic work examines how players "understand themselves as players and as social actors through the gaming experience" (p.iii), draws his definitions of performance and performativity from feminist theorists such as Judith Butler. Harper makes the argument that personal identity is not a given, but is actively shaped by one's choices, in a continual process of reinforcement or renewal. In this view, identity is influenced by a person's opinion of what that identity should be. In short, identity is performed. The particular type of performance I describe in this dissertation, however, also tries to *draw attention* to this performativity.

games, the notion that action is achieved in concert *with* other actors echoes Hickey's observation that Erving's famous layup was not an isolated feat, but rather a *response* to Abdul-Jabbar's challenge.

Arendt's concept of "plurality" offers us a compelling vision of what "togetherness" might entail. Actually, as Arendt sees it, the plurality of the public sphere transcends "mere togetherness" (p.36). Importantly, plurality reminds us that *men* and not "Man" populate the earth. It indicates not sameness, but a twofold character of *equality* and *distinction*. "Equality" here suggests the presence of respected *peers*, much like how Erving and Abdul-Jabbar were well-matched adversaries. "Distinction" refers to the fact that human beings are "unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities" (p.97). On this point, Arendt warns us against conceptualizing togetherness as a "unitedness of many into one" (p.214). Contrary to Bakhtin's imagery of individual bodies losing themselves to a united mass (as quoted above), the concept of plurality emphasizes the relations *between* individuals. Following Arendt, then, we might evocatively portray games as "tables," in that they are located "between those who sit around it" and simultaneously "relate and separate" (p.52) players at the same time.

Another key facet of plurality is that it provides "the constant presence of others" who can "testify" to action and speech (p.95). Action, dependent on this plurality, thereby creates the condition for *remembrance*. Again drawing inspiration from Ancient Greece, Arendt depicts action as the struggle to leave something behind more permanent than one's earthly life – as a path to glory and immortality. The memorability of action, as applied to gameplay, certainly resonates with Lowood's observation that a beautiful play like Erving's layup will live on in spectators' memories and imaginations. In this sense, games can be viewed as a form of "organized remembrance" (p.198) – at least where players are acting and not just laboring or working. Games, like the *polis*, serve as an amplifier of memorability, in that they "multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself" (p.197).

How and where this remembrance manifests itself, exactly, is not entirely clear. On one hand, Arendt explains that action and speech, if they are to be remembered, must be reified into "things" like poetry, written documents, monuments, and other records. In this way, the continued existence of action depends not only on the presence of others who will see, hear, and remember, but also on "the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things" (p.95). And yet, this materialization seems to come at a cost. Tangible remembrances are at best an echo or "dead letter," in that they "replace something which grew out of and for a fleeting moment indeed existed as the 'living spirit'" (p.95). For Arendt, *who* a person is transcends *what* they have done. Great deeds reside beyond the work process.

As far as remembrance is concerned, Arendt suggests that the *polis* – in our case, the community of players – provides a partial solution. Riffing off Pericles' famous Funeral Oration, Arendt writes: "The *polis* [...] gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them" (p.197). I might need this written dissertation to tell the broader world about Josh's audacious Mafia feats, but for Josh, the "reality" of his deeds was already established by the presence of those of us who played with him. Still, this qualification may not fully satisfy us. Honig makes a compelling critique that if we are to account for the "stabilizing power" and "durability" of action, we must do so with "something more than the stories told by spectators" (p.94).[22]

[22] For Honig, the durability of action is accounted for by *writing*. She explains: "if we take writing to be the perfection of Arendtian action, and speech to be its poor mimetic or derivative cousin, then many of the apparent oddities of Arendt's account of action begin to make more sense" (p. 95). As a concrete example, Honig points to the American Declaration of Independent and Constitution – examples that Arendt offers herself. She argues that the two documents "combine permanence with augmentation in a way that enables them to create some 'worldly permanence' while at the same time respecting the contingency of the radically unpredictable and uncontrollable public realm" (p. 96). I argue below that *gesture* provides a similar solution.

To better articulate the durability of action, I would like to propose that games can, in fact, nurture a more tangible form of remembrance – one that still retains a modicum of the "living spirit" of acting persons. On this point, we can productively draw on Luce Giard's (1998a, 1998b) concept of *gesture*. Giard, reflecting on the simple joys of cooking, describes how we incorporate certain gestures into our own life practices, sometimes without even realizing it. Thinking about the women and family who preceded her, Giard frames cooking and the gestures of everyday life as a kind of living memory:

> As long as one of us preserves your nourishing knowledge, as long as the recipes of your tender patience are transmitted from hand to hand and from generation to generation, a fragmentary yet tenacious memory of your life itself will live on. The sophisticated ritualization of basic gestures has thus become more dear to me than the persistence of words and texts, because body techniques seem better protected from the superficiality of fashion, and also, a more profound and heavier material faithfulness is at play there, *a way of being-in-the-world* and making it one's home (1998b, p.154, emphasis mine).

Each cook's repertoire speaks to a *doing-cooking*, as Giard phrases it. This notion of "doing-cooking" serves to remind us that the ritual and inventiveness of seemingly ordinary gestures speak to entire lifestyles. Like Arendtian action, doing-cooking is both personal and interpersonal, "rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self" (p.157). The cook "creates her personal way of navigating through accepted, allowed, and ready-made techniques" (p.156), but her individuated style also draws on a rich history of prior practices – "a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures" (p.157). Unlike Arendt, who focuses on human deeds that are extraordinary and unprecedented, Giard champions the everyday. Nevertheless, Giard's poetic account of gesture provides an evocative description of how ritual and performance propagate through communities, over multiple generations. In particular, Giard makes a strong case for why gesture, as a way of being-in-the-world, represents something more than just a product of work. Gesture does, at least to some degree, embody the "who" of a person (or persons).

Josh's Mafia antics and Erving's layup offer two excellent examples here. Both feats have inspired the kinds of fragmentary, embodied memories which Giard celebrates. Throughout this dissertation, I recount similar examples from my own games. In Chapter 4, for instance, I describe how my friend Bernie started taking showy, "gentlemanly" bows before each round of my game *Johann Sebastian Joust*. The bow, a deliberately silly and conciliatory gesture towards one's opponents, was ultimately adopted by my entire play community. As I continue to share this bowing custom with other players around the world, a tiny bit of Bernie – his way of being-in-the-world, or rather, *being-in-the-game* – is shared as well.

Given all this focus on remembrance, we might wonder whether Arendtian action is ultimately just a form of vanity or machismo. Pitkin muses (somewhat rhetorically) that we might worry that Arendt's citizens "seem no less selfish than any "rational economic man'" (p.337), resembling "posturing little boys clamoring for attention" (p.338). Such a reading, however, misunderstands Arendt's intent. According to Arendt, action is a type of activity that lies beyond the cycle of means and ends. Action's meaning, she specifies, resides "only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement" (p.206). Indeed, she warns that too much competitiveness can destabilize a community.[23] As Pitkin qualifies, Arendtian action speaks not only to self-display, but also to *self-development*.

[23] In fact, Arendt claims that too much agonal spirit is what eventually brought the Greek city-states to ruin, "[poisoning] the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred" (2005, p.16).

Figure 8 – *J.S. Joust*, in Cologne, August 2011. Somewhat theatrically, a player holds his controller up to the sky. (Photo by Dean Tate).

Here, Arendtian action resonates with DeKoven's (1978) concept of the "Well-Played Game." Warning against the transformation of play into "display," DeKoven emphasizes that the "real prize" of playing a game is found *within us*, "within whatever change occurred to us as a result of playing well, as a result of whatever happens to us when we experience excellence" (p.103). He argues that even though we might play for meaning, an explicit striving to become meaningful can actually be counterproductive. In DeKoven's formulation, we must first and foremost be willing to simply *play*. Any meaning, important though it might be, follows after a general openness to playfulness.

This more nuanced articulation of Arendtian action certainly seems to resonate with Erving's behind-the-backboard layup. Rather than an attempt to "show off," the shot seems like an improvised product of desperate circumstances – a creative way to circumvent Abdul-Jabbar's defensive challenge. But what do Arendt's caveats have to say about Josh's Mafia antics, which were likely more premeditated? Is that type of premeditation, that deliberate striving for recognition, so wholly incompatible with Arendt's notion of action? Honig, in her reading of Arendt, makes the case that just because action is *caused* by intentions does not necessarily imply that it derives its *meaning* from them. In this view, action is indeed "attended" by intentions, motives, and goals, but is crucially able to *transcend* them – to create "'new relations and realities' rather than consolidate old ones" (p.78).[24] Arendt's crucial realization is that play and display are not necessarily dichotomous – that, sometimes, they are actually one and the same.

Arguably, then, Josh's Mafia antics do indeed stand as an excellent example of Arendtian action. At least as I read him, Josh fully intended to change the game with his atypical behavior. Yet I don't think he ever had a clear aim for what, exactly, would happen. Mostly, he wanted to provoke us, to challenge himself, and to explore new territory. Such an attitude eschews any straightforward calculation of means and ends.

Despite all this championing of action, we should be careful not to position it as somehow "superior" to labor and work. The point is rather that action is important *in addition to* those activities. In fact, Arendt stresses that action depends on them. The biological necessities satisfied by labor, for instance, provide an important foil for the freedom of action: "Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity" (p.121). An entirely public life, she writes, lacks "the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground" (p.71). Labor and work, though sometimes mundane, provide crucial contrasts against which the extraordinariness of action shines out all the brighter.

Here, Arendt's philosophy of political action illuminates why performance artist Allan Kaprow (1972) gets it so wrong when he famously states that "We can't say we game not to game" (p.122). Kaprow, drawing a clear distinction between "game" and "play," writes against the former. In particular, he expresses concern over the combat mentality of "taking sides, victory, and defeat" (p.122). Like the New Games progenitors (see above), Kaprow argues in favor of competing against one's own limits instead of competing against other people. "Agonistic games," he claims, "no matter how ritualized, are testimonials to the forces they would sublimate" (p.121). Yet Arendt's account teaches us that this supposed dichotomy between playfulness and competitiveness is a false one.[25] Certainly, Arendt would share

[24] Central to Honig's reading here is her central argument that Arendtian action is *performative*, not constative – that it "produces or gives birth to the actor or performer rather than merely expresses his antecedent character" (p.78).

[25] The notion that competition against oneself and competition against other people can actually work together, in concert, is explored by game designer David Sirlin (2006) in his book *Playing to Win: Becoming the Champion*. Writing about his experience as top-level videogame player, Sirlin frames competitive games as a means of expression. He observes: "many people, myself included, have come to understand a lot more about who they really are through the way they end up expressing themselves in games." Echoing DeKoven's and Arendt's own warnings, Sirlin points out that striving too hard to win can be counter-productive: "Those who love the game and *play to play* will uncover the unusual nuances that might be important in a tournament" (emphasis his).

Kaprow's interest is in play pursued as its own end, beyond the lure of immediate accomplishment. But Arendt's important insight is that *agon*, at least when structured and managed the right way, can indeed nurture the spirit of performativity and togetherness that Kaprow and the New Games progenitors are chasing. As Hickey puts it, the rules of a system need not simply "govern"; they can also *liberate*, translating "the pain of violent conflict into *the pleasures of disputation* – into the excitements of politics, the delights of rhetoric art, and competitive sport" (p.156, emphasis mine). Hickey makes the case that it was precisely such liberating rules that enabled Erving's famous layup.

Figure 9 – Players fight over the controllers while playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* at the GAMMA IV party, San Francisco, 2010. (Photo via Official GDC 2010 Flickr stream).

Kaprow's phrase "gaming not to game" thus provides a perfect articulation of what I mean by performative gameplay, and embodies the design ethos I try to describe throughout this dissertation. In Chapter 4, for example, I position my games *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* as arenas for self-directed performances – arenas that intentionally *masquerade* as well-formed games. The lesson is that even though a game might first appear to be competitive and goal-oriented, the messy reality of it can be more complex. My hope is that the gaming mindset can be harnessed to actuate new kinds of performance.

Admittedly, all games, even the most traditional ones, foster the type of extraordinary deeds that Arendt champions in her philosophy of action. Nonetheless, in this dissertation I explore what it might mean to design with that consideration in mind. As Honig points out, Arendt's writings remind us that "some institutions are more likely than others to occasion action, that only some sets of arrangements will manifest the institutional respect for contingency that is one of the necessary conditions of virtuosic

action" (pp.76-77). As such, the desire to somehow design around or completely thwart the potentially infelicitous contingency of gameplay is misguided. Arendtian action – and, by extension, performative gameplay – is meaningful precisely *because* of that contingency. As Honig observes, Arendt calls on us to "treat the absolute as an invitation for intervention, [...] declare ourselves resistant to it, [...] refuse its claim to irresistibility by deauthoring it" (p.115). This "declaring ourselves resistant" to the absolute is exactly the spirit that I hope to encourage with the games I write about in this dissertation.[26] The insight here is that games and competition provide a perfect foil for action, as well as an *invitation* to perform.

In this dissertation, I explore how games, like Arendt's bodies politic, might purposefully be designed to "leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are, using them merely as the medium, as it were, into which certain islands of predictability are thrown and in which certain guideposts of reliability are erected." (p.244). This idea, that unpredictability itself might be utilized as a type of design material, is the red thread that runs through my notions of dialogic games, broken games, and low process intensity games (as examined in the chapters ahead). As I see it, the design trick is to successfully sell the players on this contingency – to convince them, as Arendt so poetically phrases it, that even "the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation" (p.190). Taking seriously Hickey's concept of "the pleasures of disputation," we players and designers might find that we can indeed, with some effort and luck, transmute the acrimony of conflict into something joyful.

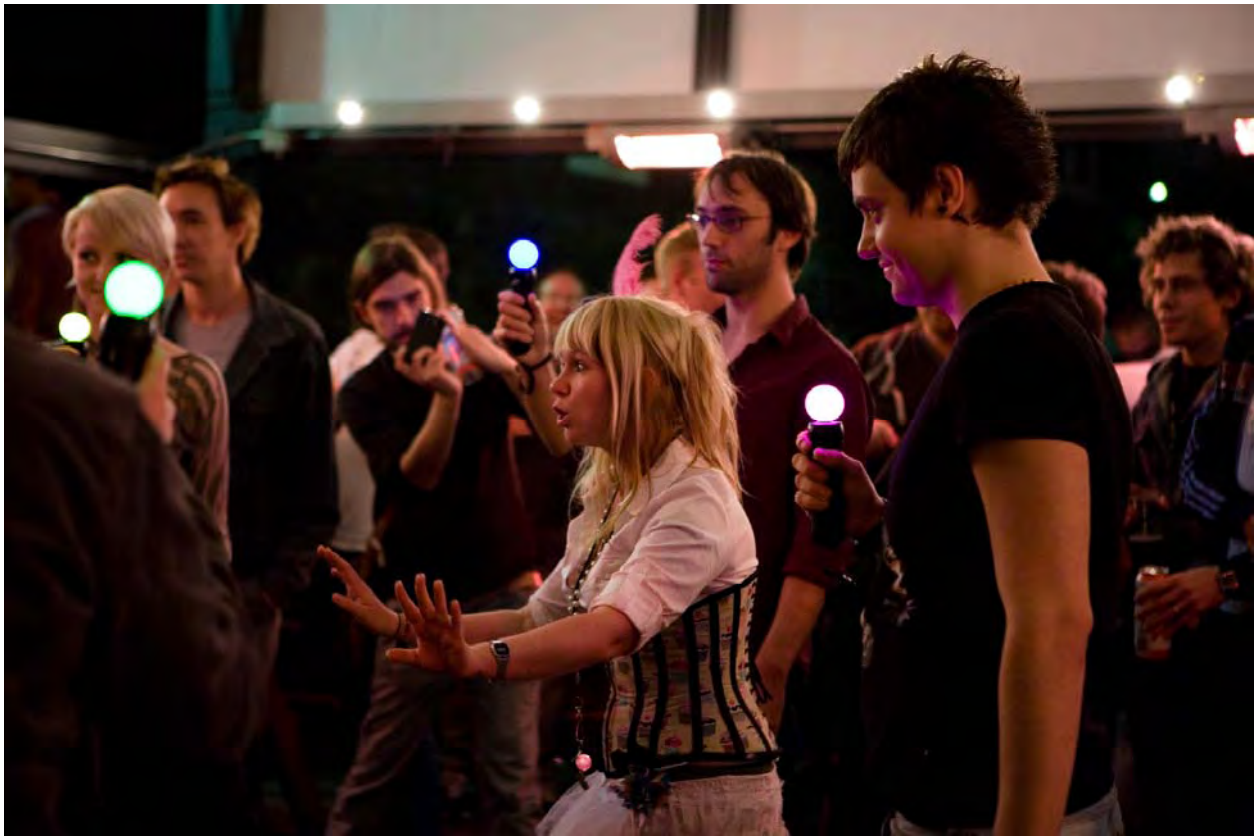

Figure 10 – *J.S. Joust* at Wild Rumpus #1 in London, September 2011. (Photo by Natalie Seery).

[26] As Honig so eloquently puts it: "The strategy is to unmask identities that aspire to constation, to deauthorize and redescribe them as performative productions by identifying spaces that escape or resist administration, regulation, and expression" (p.124). This description of identifying spaces for performative production does an excellent job articulating the attitude I hope to inspire with my games.

Dissertation Outline

The body of this dissertation consists of five standalone articles:

Chapter 1 – "Research 'After' Design: Embracing a Purposeful Distancing between Academia and Game Design Practice" describes how I position my written research in relation to my game design practice. In particular, I call attention to the social contexts in which different kinds of work are done. Riffing off Christopher Frayling's oft-cited categorization of research for, into, and through art and design, I explore the notion of "research after design." I explain how, when, and why we scholars might want to do our design work outside the university, and how academic research might still follow afterwards.

Chapter 2 – "Dialogic Game Design" explores a form of togetherness that is sometimes nurtured between the player and the game *designer*. Refining my previous work on "abusive game design" (Wilson & Sicart, 2010), I examine what it might mean to conceptualize "dialogue" as a design aesthetic. Specifically, I identify techniques for pitting designer against user in a playful, rewarding meta-game. Reviewing the design research literature, I reflect on how the concept of "dialogue" has previously been appropriated. I also look at a number of example games (including my own project *Dark Room Sex Game*), as well as several relevant precedents from literature and performance art.

Chapter 3 – "Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now: On Self-Effacing Games and Unachievements" analyzes a party game that I co-designed, *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (*B.U.T.T.O.N.*). I propose two terms – "unachievements" and "self-effacing games" – which help articulate the specific qualities that distinguish deliberately broken games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* from more traditional digital games. I situate these broken games in terms of Henning Eichberg's concept of the "impossible game" and Bernie DeKoven's notion of the "Well-Played game."

Chapter 4 – "In Celebration of Low Process Intensity" questions certain value statements that continue to proliferate in discussions about what games are and how we should make them. Reflecting on *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and also my game *Johann Sebastian Joust*, I espouse a design philosophy that challenges that position that rules, above all else, are what constitute the "essence" of games. I argue that designing for a conspicuous absence of technological systemization can help foreground social context. I elaborate on the idea of game as *alibi* – as a culturally-recognized excuse to "act out" and play the fool.

Chapter 5 – "When Are "Broken Games" Actually Broken? Lessons from Two Conference Game Experiments" presents case studies of *The Collectible Business Card Game* and *Fuck You, It's Art!*, two experimental, non-digital conference games that I co-designed. I identify spectacle and subversion two key considerations when designing games that aim to facilitate social interaction in public settings. Drawing from theoretical work on embodiment and situated action, I argue that it is often counterproductive to conceptualize "context" as something separate from the game content itself.

I end with a short Afterward, recounting a particular gameplay anecdote that illustrates some of the various ideas explored throughout this dissertation.

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- Chapter 1 –

Research “After” Design

Embracing a Purposeful Distancing between Academia and Game Design Practice

Research "After" Design:
Embracing a Purposeful Distancing between Academia and Game Design Practice

In the disciplines of both design and the arts, it remains an open and contentious question how research can benefit from or incorporate creative practice (and visa-versa). Indeed, the question has generated its own massive body of literature, spanning journal articles, edited collections (e.g. Laurel, 2003; Biggs & Karlsson, 2011) and even entire conferences (Biggs, 2000). As Biggs and Büchler (2011) argue, the stubborn intractability of the question owes to the fact that academic researchers and professional practitioners often hold very different values. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that there exists one straightforward solution that can satisfy both communities.

Despite these tensions, methodological work on the relationship between research and practice tends to focus on ways in which we might reconcile the two more harmoniously. Koskinen et al. (2008), for instance, express interest in integrated approaches where "design work and research is *interwoven*" and where "design work becomes *inseparable* from research" (p.46, emphasis mine). Such a model is also articulated by design researcher Anthony Dunne (2005), who describes his design-theoretical work as a process in which practice and research are deeply intertwined:

> [The designs in this book] are not necessarily illustrations of the ideas discussed in earlier chapters, nor are the earlier chapters an explanation of these proposals. They evolved *simultaneously* and are part of the same design process (p.xviii, emphasis mine).

In this passage, Dunne usefully crystalizes the ideal of the so-called "researcher-practitioner" – a scholar who strives to fuse practice and research into one coherent amalgam.

There are many reasons, both practical and ideological, why such a blend of research and creative practice is so attractive an ideal. Torsten Kälvemark (2011), writing from a European perspective, links the emergence of "practice-based research" in the arts to the increasing integration of art schools and polytechnics into universities. Kälvemark argues that the students and faculty of these programs have consequently had to adapt to the regulations that accompany traditional research institutions, as well as to funding opportunities that target university-level research. More generally, the question of whether creative practice can itself be considered as research output affects what kind of work qualifies for PhD dissertations and tenure reviews. And beyond university politics, a number of design researchers (e.g. Seago and Dunne, 1999; Niedderer, 2007) have argued that creative practice offers a kind of tacit and experiential knowledge that cannot be generated or conveyed by traditional written argumentation.

The ideal of the researcher-practitioner as a noble goal clearly continues to serve as a productive model for many design and arts scholars. That said, I have come to realize that it is not a model that adequately describes my own particular situation. In my day job, I am a researcher at the IT University of Copenhagen, where I am writing a dissertation on videogame design theory. On the side, I develop my own videogames along with friends and colleagues. I am the co-founder of the Copenhagen Game Collective, a group of local game developers. I also co-run my own studio, Die Gute Fabrik. My colleagues and I are active participants in a global "indie games" scene – a self-identified movement of independent game developers.

Increasingly, I have found myself writing, in an academic capacity, about the games I design with the Collective and with my studio. Yet I would not necessarily label myself as a "researcher-practitioner," because I think of my work in terms of two different identities. Indeed, I've found it

productive to maintain some distance between my professional and academic lives. Playing off Koskinen et al.'s notion of "interweaving" practice and research, I would like to propose an alternative metaphor of the patchwork quilt, where the two modes of working are connected, but in a decidedly heterogeneous way. Alternatively, we might use Stuart Moulthrop's (2005) metaphor of the "amphibian." Moulthrop (2005), writing about game design and interactive fiction specifically, lauds a new generation of builder-thinkers as "elegant amphibians, equipped for survival in new worlds as well as old" (p.214). This notion of operating between two worlds – two *social contexts* - resonates with the kind of approach I've adopted myself.

In this paper, I want to call attention to that relationship between social context and the work we do, academic and professional. First, I give a detailed account of my own work, explaining some of the advantages I have enjoyed in doing my game development under the guises of the Copenhagen Game Collective and my game studio. Second, reviewing a number of perspectives from the design research literature, I argue that my own experiences are not typically adequately accounted for by current academic wisdom. Third, riffing off Christopher Frayling's (1993) famous categorization of research *for*, *into*, and *through* art and design, I propose the notion of "research *after* design." Specifically, I explore how, when, and why we scholars might want to do our design work outside the university, and how academic research might still follow afterwards.

"Being in the Moment" and Designing Spontaneously, Over Beers

In 2010, I designed and developed a digitally-mediated party videogame along with three friends from the Copenhagen Game Collective. The game, *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (a.k.a. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*), subverts the familiar context of console gaming by having players race to and wrestle over their controllers in physical space. Many of the game's rules are intentionally ambiguous, enforceable only by the human players and not the computer. In designing the game, we hoped to coax players into "cheating" and negotiating over the rules. As a part of my PhD work, I have also written a number of chapters and journal articles about the game (Wilson, 2011; Wilson, forthcoming). Writing from a humanistic perspective, I am interested in how *B.U.T.T.O.N.* challenges certain rhetoric in the ubiquitous computing and game design literatures, as well as how it connects to other traditions such as folk games and contemporary art.

But the truth is that my academic work on the game was never part of the original plan. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was designed and developed in a context decidedly separate from that of my job as a university researcher. The game was conceived somewhat unexpectedly, while drinking beers at an impromptu birthday party. Our "agenda" was three-fold. First, the brainstorming process was an end in itself. We enjoyed making each other laugh through absurd design proposals. Second, we wanted to create something that would make an impact in the burgeoning indie games scene. Third, we wanted to score free passes to the Game Developers Conference, the reward for those finalists invited to the GAMMA IV showcase. Given the sheer volume of competing submissions, we knew we would have to distinguish our game from the other entries. To that end, we asked ourselves: what is the least amount of work we can do to develop a game that will catch the attention of the judges? From that very instrumental (and competitive) mindset emerged the idea of taking the game beyond the screen, out into the physical world in front of the computer.

Only months later did I slowly realize that the game might be relevant to my research interests. Both the design process and the game itself embodied an ethos of spontaneity. Even the development team was assembled somewhat haphazardly, comprised of four of us who just happened to be there for the initial conversation. Moreover, none of my three co-developers have

any vested interests in the academic world. My peer group – my co-developers, the exhibition judges, and my intended audience – speaks to a specific community of indie game practitioners. Nevertheless, the unplanned development of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* has made a significant impact on the direction of my PhD dissertation. Working on the game reinvigorated my thinking, prompting me to rearticulate my ideas and connect them to academic and design traditions I had not yet engaged. At the outset of my PhD, I had thought that I might build small prototypes to test some of my existing theoretical ideas – perhaps with traditional qualitative methodologies. Instead, what has worked far better for me has been to focus on designing games that will be of interest to my peers. Only after gaining some traction in that scene have I stopped to reflect back upon what I have made and how it might (or might not) be made relevant to my academic colleagues.

This approach – of designing games in my life outside my university job, then writing post-facto about those projects which happen to resonate with my academic work – is one that I have now repeated multiple times. My interest in "abusive" game design practices (Wilson & Sicart, 2010), for example, was sparked by another project that I did with the Collective, *Dark Room Sex Game* (208). More recently, I have written a chapter about my PlayStation Move game, *Johann Sebastian Joust* (2011), and the questions it raises about certain design values that are often echoed in the game studies and game design literatures (Wilson, forthcoming). *J.S. Joust*, like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, stands as an example of how professional success can productively shape academic research. Before even understanding what the game really was or what theoretical issues it might raise, I knew that the game was interesting and *fun*. Less than a year after its conception, it has already been exhibited at numerous showcases in cities across Europe and North America.

The point here is that my developer peers serve as far more than a pool of potential collaborators. Crucially, my game design practice provides me with a sense of purpose and a coherent *social context*. When I'm developing a game, I find it critical to be fully "in the moment." In that mode, my only concerns are how the game will be received, and how it will advance me and my teammates. Nevertheless, the unforeseen results of that design practice have provided valuable fodder for my academic work. This distancing between my two lives – that is, the maintaining of two different social contexts – has been beneficial to both my design practice *and* my research.

Finding a Space for Purposefully Unpurposeful Design

Above, I paint a picture of a design process that is messily spontaneous and carried out in a social space far removed from the university. Despite these contextual factors, is it desirable or even possible to view my games *themselves* as "research" output? And does my insistence on keeping the two contexts somewhat separate betray a conservatism that stereotypes what "research" is?

Christopher Frayling's (1993) famously distinguishes between research that is done *for*, *into*, and *through* art and design. Research *for* art and design refers to the kind of information gathering that a creative practitioner might do to guide or shape a project. In this kind of research, the goal is the project itself, not the generation of generalizable knowledge. Research *into* art and design refers to work that established disciplines do in studying creative practice in terms of its history, aesthetics, economics, politics, etc. Research *through* art and design, despite Frayling's claims otherwise, is arguably the most unclear of the three categorizations. It refers to objects and performances that communicate new knowledge *in themselves*.

One controversial question here is whether objects and performances can indeed communicate new knowledge on their own, or whether they must be accompanied by some form of more traditional written argumentation. Kenneth Agnew (1993) argues that design research – and, as a

result, design practice too – suffers from a lack of thorough documentation. He writes: "intended function, actual performance, and contextual comparisons need to be quite exactly expressed before intelligent appreciation is possible" (p.122). Similarly, Dunne and Seago (1999) argue that "research" – even research where the design object takes a central role – should be transparent. Though they advocate for the role of craftsmanship and creative practice in PhD projects, they look towards "*systematic* research activities whose goal is knowledge" (p.16, emphasis mine).

Biggs and Büchler (2007) make the distinction that academic research, as opposed to personal research, aims to create knowledge that is the new for the scholarly community. Brandt and Binder (2007), echoing Dunne and Seago, frame design research as *deliberate*:

> What distinguishes the ordinary design program from the program in design research is the way the design research program is challenged by experiments that deliberately [seek] to establish the strength and scope of the program in relation to an overarching knowledge interest (p.4).

Here, the notion of the "program" implies a semi-coherent set of questions or intended area of explanation. Daniel Fallman (2008) advances a similarly "programmatic" take on design research. He writes: "When our interaction design researchers work in [the area of design practice], they must do so with an explicit design research question in mind, or with the clear intent of forming such a question from their activities" (p.6). Fallman also articulates a somewhat looser model of "design exploration," a more speculative, provocative approach that asks "What if?" Still, Fallman specifies that even this approach is "Often driven by ideals or theory" (p.8).

The critical disconnect between these perspectives and my own experience is that my design work – at least my most successful work – is seldom driven by clear questions, or even by an intent to generate sharable "knowledge." Reflecting back on *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, *Dark Room Sex Game*, and *J.S. Joust*, in none of those projects *did it even occur to me* – at least not at the outset – that I might eventually write about those games in my dissertation. Moreover, I've designed a number of games that I did *not* end up writing about, nor ever considered doing so.

This realization – that academic design practice might *generate* new theories, not follow one that already exist – is certainly not foreign to the design research literature. Brandt and Binder point out that some methods employ design experiments to uncover unanticipated research questions. Gaver et al. (2009), reflecting on their experience designing a deliberately playful home monitoring system that ultimately failed to engage its users, explicitly question the efficacy of theory-driven design. The authors argue that focusing on abstract ideas can distract designers from addressing other critical questions that inevitably arise. They write:

> This focus on a particular conceptual point, to the detriment of other possible concerns, can be seen as an example of *design for research*. That is, our design activities were pursued primarily in service of a theoretical concern. This contrasts with our more typical stance of *design as research*, in which conceptual payoffs follow from design activities that balance multiple concerns to produce compelling experiences (p.2221, emphasis theirs).

The authors' distinction between "for" and "as" speaks to two different mindsets – one which focuses on demonstrating a pre-formulated concept, and one which concentrates on making something compelling to users. Attributing their failure to the former mindset, Gaver et al. wonder whether they "might have learned new lessons from whatever success we did manage to find" (p.2221) if they had instead adopted the latter approach.

Here, Gaver et al. frame their design failure as an issue of "process" – as a question of *how* and *when* we might balance theorizing and practice. What their account pays less attention to, however, are the questions of *with whom* do we do these activities, *where* do we do them, and *why*. Methodology and process are certainly important, but so is social context. When we conduct design "experiments," to what audiences, exactly, are we directing our results? In my own case, I do often strive to design games that will be new and "experimental." But the key distinction is that I primarily hope to design games that are new *to the indie games scene*. I maintain that it matters who we see ourselves in conversation with, and when.

As I see it, the "research" component of my work is comprised of the articles I write. I view my academic research as a series of after-the-fact reflections, a kind of creator's statement that also engages the scholarly literature. For that reason, I intend my articles to be read as theory-based work in the humanities, judged by the quality of my argumentation and by how I build upon the existing literature. In my capacity as a scholar, my aim is primarily to provide evocative conceptual frameworks that will inspire us to think about game design in a new way.

That research is deeply dependent on social context is not an unprecedented idea. Brandt and Binder, for instance, emphasize the importance of finding grounds on which "we can become each other's peers" (p.3). Biggs and Büchler (2007) likewise argue that it is the community that "owns" the judgment of "whether a particular response constitutes an answer to the question" (p.68). The insight here is that all methods are only meaningful in context. This evaluation leads Biggs and Büchler to propose that practice-based researchers form a new, third community that is able to determine its own distinct set of values. Koskinen et al. (2008) make a similar suggestion, looking towards a growing design research "constituency" that might set its own standards.

This call for a new, third community does not completely resonate with my own experience. My worry is that such a vision underestimates the value of latching onto existing cultural machineries. One key advantage of a world like indie games is precisely its relevance to a broader audience. To be clear, in championing that scene, I don't wish to over-romanticize its potential. We should recognize that the cultural practice of computer game development continues to suffer from diversity issues (e.g. gender, race, class) (see Ray, 2004). Moreover, the indie games scene is not one monolithic community. These points notwithstanding, for me, operating within that world has opened up tremendous opportunities for exploring new ideas. My priority, therefore, has been to productively harness the energy of that scene, not to try to reconcile it with the standards of academic scholarship. I want to suggest that if we're smart about whom we work with – as well as when, where, and how – we can indeed have that cake and still eat it too.

Research *After* Design – Opportunities and Rationales

Riffing off Frayling's (1993) categorization of research *for*, *into*, and *through* design, I want to propose a notion of "research *after* design." Though Frayling's categorization is the subject of considerable skepticism (see Jonas, 2007; Sevaldson, 2010), my somewhat cheeky use of the preposition "after" is intended to call attention to alternative strategies for going about design research. I agree with Frayling that research can act as an important source of "nourishment" for creative practice, but my experience also tells me that we should take care in deciding where, when, and how we build those bridges. The rallying cry of "research after design" is an invitation to operate in multiple social worlds, engaging each on its own terms. The advantages are many, especially in regards to a thriving cultural scene like that of indie game development.

First, operating under the guise of an indie developer opens up valuable opportunities for me to distribute my creative output and solicit feedback. Dan Pinchbeck (2010), a games researcher who has also enjoyed success and critical acclaim as an experimental game designer, explains how even a modest game project can quickly generate a wealth of comments and opinions – at least when released in the right channels and to the right audience. For Pinchbeck, the benefit is that his theoretical inquiries are conducted with a certain "ecological validity." For me, the point is that the dialogue I engage in with my peers and my players helps inspire me to make sense of the things I design and direct my attention to any relevant issues that arise.

Second, presenting myself as a fellow indie developer instead of as an outsider or a hybrid affords me insider credibility. This kind of credibility is essential because it affects my peers' perception of me. It affects what email lists I get invited to join, what talks I'm invited to give, and so forth. The reality is that some practitioners are skeptical towards and even outright dismissive of academia. For this reason, it is sometimes important that I first prove my credentials as an indie developer before I open up about my university job. As such, there are practical reasons why I'd want to position myself as an indie developer who also happens to do academic research, instead of as an academic researcher who is trying to make indie games. Or rather, it is critical that I can choose between different framings, depending on the situation.

Third, having stakeholders in the indie games scene gives my design practice a valuable sense of purpose and urgency. My game *J.S. Joust* stands as an excellent example. At an exhibition in Copenhagen in May 2011, I had shown an early prototype of the game to a renowned games curator, who later asked me if he could run the game at an upcoming event. Without that high-profile, time-limited request, I'm not sure I would have ever been desperate enough to develop the new, more stable version of the game. In turn, that new version of the game ended up drawing my attention to key theoretical issues I had not yet considered.

Fourth, positioning myself as an indie developer puts me on a more equal footing with my teammates. In the type of deeply collaborative design work I do, team spirit and trust are essential. My teammates need to understand that I am focused on the success of the group more than I am in instrumentalizing the design process in service of my PhD dissertation. How I frame the work matters, because it is important that my teammates feel like "we are all in it together." They do realize that I might some day write about the games we make, but at least during the development process itself, they expect me to prioritize the team and the game.

These points notwithstanding, my suggestion is not that we might try to fully dissociate creative practice from research. To the contrary, I recognize that the two often exist in synergy. I reflect on my own practice in an academic setting because I believe that there is something useful to be gleamed from someone who has "been there" throughout the entire development process, and who is able to articulate those experiences post-facto within a relevant set of academic discourses. I am uniquely positioned to talk about the intentions behind the projects and the attitudes that shaped the design processes. Moreover, I believe that my academic work eventually impacts my design practice, even if I am not always fully cognizant of the influence. Clearly, all the time I spend thinking and writing informs my design explorations – at least on some level. On a more practical level, my academic job affords me a number of key privileges, including the luxury of developing games without having to worry about how to make a living doing so.

My point here is simply that there are alternative, under-theorized ways of structuring the relationship between academia and design practice. One strategy that has worked well for me personally has been to embrace a purposeful distancing between the two – to operate in two different social contexts that help me position the two strands of my work in a productive fashion.

Making such a clear distinction between social contexts offers one possible mechanism for ensuring that design practice remains sufficiently organic and self-motivated. The insight is that the way in which we choose to frame ourselves does indeed affect the work we do.

Caveats and Conclusions

In this article, I made a case for why it can in some situations be valuable to maintain a purposeful distance between design practice and academic research, in a kind of patchwork arrangement. I argued that the design research literature has sometimes focused on "process" at the expense of reflecting on the social contexts in which we choose to do our work. My claim is that design researchers stand to benefit from paying attention to the various opportunities that different cultural worlds offer. Reflecting on my own practice, I outlined a model in which theoretical reflection follows *after* design work, post-facto.

Though this arrangement has worked well for me given the particulars of my situation, I do want to emphasize that it is only one model among many. Operating in two different social worlds, under two different sets of expectations, admittedly requires a lot of extra work. Moreover, conflicts of interest can arise when writing about one's own professional practice. The onus is on the researcher, then, to do valuable theoretical work that transcends mere salesmanship. With these caveats in mind, I maintain that engaging other social and cultural worlds – on their terms – offers one particularly fruitful strategy for unearthing new ideas.

As such, I hope some useful, more generalizable insights can be drawn from my formulation. There are sizable payoffs that come with juggling two professional lives, operating among different social and cultural worlds. The lesson is that sometimes, it is more productive to *embrace* the tensions between those worlds, rather than struggling to reconcile them cleanly. I suspect that other scholar-designers, especially those working in games, might find the same.

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- Chapter 2 -

Dialogic Game Design

Dialogic Game Design

Introduction – Pwning the designer

R. Kiba is playing *Kaizo Mario*, a twisted *Super Mario World* (1991) mod designed specially for him by his friend, T. Takemoto. In a series of edited video recordings posted online (e.g. Kiba and Takemoto, 2007a), Kiba slowly but steadily slogs through an onslaught of maniacally difficult obstacles and traps.

It quickly becomes clear that Takemoto is a trickster, a kind of evil genius qua level designer. *Kaizo Mario* – better known as "Asshole Mario" from its popularization on YouTube – is not only extraordinarily difficult, but also difficult in mischievous ways. It seems as if the game was designed specifically to toy with the player's emotions. Nevertheless, Kiba, a virtuosic player, is holding his own. Designer and player appear equally matched.

By this point, Kiba has made it all the way to Stage 6 – the underwater level (e.g. Kiba and Takemoto, 2007b). Just after the halfway mark, he approaches a narrow passageway. Walking down the passageway, he suddenly halts; something feels wrong. We can almost hear his thoughts: *This passageway is too narrow, too quiet. Takemoto has ambushed me too many times for me to fall for this again.*

Kiba turns around, realizing that he has a second option. Taking advantage of a quirk in the *Super Mario World* game system, he swims underneath the passageway, below the bottom edge of the screen. Lo and behold, his instincts are proven prescient; as Kiba safely swims below the screen, a Bullet Bill enemy shoots down the suspicious passageway. Had Kiba continued down the passageway, he would have died in yet another of his friend's carefully laid traps.

This small victory might appear inconsequential at first glance. Even if Kiba had fallen for the trap, he would have restarted at the halfway mark, right before the passageway. Having learned his lesson, he could have conquered the obstacle the second or third time around, without even having lost much time.

Such a perspective misses what's actually at stake in this moment. The "game" here is not just the struggle of player against level; it is also a contest of *player against designer* – a battle of wits and willpower. In focusing exclusively on the game system, we risk overlooking the felt experience of a personal victory over a peer, the satisfaction of correctly predicting one's opponent. In this view, the game system and levels are ultimately just instruments employed by T. Takemoto, who himself looms as the "true" adversary. In this sense, *Kaizo Mario* is a game packaged within a larger game – that of outsmarting the designer.

Admittedly, we don't know how Kiba himself sees things. But speaking as spectators and players of *Kaizo Mario*, we can reflect upon how we ourselves perceive the game. As one YouTube commenter (Josue31627, 2009) puts it: "The player pwned the creator so bad when he knew something was up with the killer plant hallway." Another commenter (MJDHX, 2009) remarks: "Finally the player was one step ahead of the designer." The choice of language here is telling. Kiba didn't just conquer the obstacle – he conquered *the creator*, the human designer.

Figure 1 – *Kaizo Mario*, Stage 6. The player, R. Kiba, senses that the narrow passageway might be a trap. (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007c).

Figure 2 – *Kaizo Mario*, Stage 6. Kiba's instincts turn out to be correct as an enemy comes flying across the screen. (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007c).

Kaizo Mario showcases a particularly extreme approach to game design. Yet we shouldn't dismiss the game as a mere practical joke. Games like *Kaizo Mario* suggest an alternative and potentially inspiring understanding of gameplay, game design, and design practice more generally. Namely, *Kaizo Mario* reminds us that game designers do more than just craft systems. They can also, under the right circumstances, engage players in a playfully confrontational meta-game – one that feels very dialogic.

Paper overview

Previously, I have written about games like *Kaizo Mario* and so-called "abusive game design" (Wilson and Sicart, 2010). In this paper, I refine some of those ideas and focus my attention less on "abusiveness" *per se* and more on the rivalry between player and designer. I explore what it might mean to conceptualize "dialogue" as a design aesthetic.

Numerous scholars and practitioners have explored strategies for facilitating a more two-way relationship between user and designer during the design process. (see Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991; Taylor, 2006; Gaver et. al, 1999). I argue that the imagery of "dialogue" can also be fruitfully appropriated when examining the felt experience of *using* a completed design. Focusing on game design in particular, I define "dialogic design" as a strategy that aims to nurture a feeling of playful, agonistic back-and-forth between designer and user. In its stronger form, this back-and-forth can be literal, as in the case of designers and players who know each other personally. But it can also be figurative – an illusion of or *feeling* of dialogue. My claim is that dialogic design, in either form, offers a refreshing and engaging approach to game design and to experience design more generally.

This paper consists of two main parts. First, in order to explicate what the theory of dialogic design provides an alternative to, I examine how the concept of "dialogue" has previously been appropriated by the design literature. Second, in order to describe dialogic design in more concrete terms, I look at a number of example games, as well as several relevant precedents from literature and performance art. These case studies are unabashedly grounded in my own subjective, idiosyncratic analyses. The cases described should not be viewed as definitively dialogic in some objective sense, but rather as instructive examples that might illuminate and inspire techniques for pitting designer against user in a playful, rewarding meta-game.

Throughout these analyses, I emphasize that dialogic design practice is highly dependent on social context, as well as on the particular backgrounds of designer and user. These contingencies notwithstanding, a dialogically oriented perspective on design can still usefully inform design practices both experimental and commercial.

User, designer, object, dialogue

In this section, I examine how the relationship between user, designer, and object has been conceptualized within the human computer interaction (HCI), game design, and design theory literatures – specifically in terms of how the metaphor of "dialogue" has been appropriated. I end with a discussion of the opportunities and shortcomings of "design for reflection," as advocated by researchers like Anthony Dunne and Phoebe Sengers. Though my own conception of dialogic design draws influence from this body of work, it also differs from it in key but subtle ways.

From science of design to conversation with materials

In his 1969 book, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, Herbert Simon (1969) urges a systematization of design theory and practice, into a better-articulated "science of design." For Simon, this endeavor to "scientize" design was motivated by two concerns. First, he believed that design theory needed to be made more explicit and precise before major research universities would embrace the discipline as academically acceptable. Second, he believed that researchers could use design theory to harness the capabilities of computers to aid design. Nigel Cross (2001), recounting a brief history of similar endeavors throughout the early and middle parts of twentieth century, adds that these efforts to systematize design reflected a concern that "industrial design had become too complex for intuitive methods" (p.52).

This notion of a "science of design" stems from what has been labeled as "the rationalistic tradition" – a worldview based in ideals of logic and planning. As Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores (1986) describe it, the rationalistic tradition approaches design problems in three steps:

1. Characterize the situation in terms of identifiable objects with well-defined properties.
2. Find general rules that apply to situations in terms of those objects and properties.
3. Apply the rules logically to the situation of concern, drawing conclusions about what should be done (p.15).

In short, the rationalistic approach places an almost singular focus on objects and systems, paying less attention to designers and users.

Simon himself goes as far as to conclude that the "proper study of mankind" is not man himself, but rather the shape and character of his material surroundings: "I have argued that people – or at least their intellective component – may be relatively simple, that most of the complexity of their behavior may be drawn from their environment, from their search for good designs. If I have made my case, then we can conclude that, in large part, the proper study of mankind is the science of design..." (p.138). This focus on designs themselves over the human beings making and using them is reflected in his characterization of "proper" design: "To predict how [a properly designed system] will behave, we need only ask, 'How would a rationally designed system behave under these circumstances?'" (p.12). This rationalistic perspective on how people might use technology ultimately leads Simon to frame design in the language of the engineering sciences, as a discipline anchored in techniques like optimization and statistical decision theory.

There have been many criticisms of this aspiration towards a science of design and of the rationalistic tradition more generally. One particularly relevant response is that of Donald Schön (1983, 1992, 1996) and his notion of "the reflective practitioner." Schön contends that design professionals do not, in practice, tackle well-formed problems that can be "solved" in one correct way, but instead face "messy, problematic situations" – situations of "uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (1983, p.49). Based on his own observations of professional designers, Schön points out that a designer's original intentions often change during the design process, "in conversation" with the specific materials and particularities of the design situation. He argues that designers do not simply respond to design situations, but also help create them, existing "in transaction" with them (1992, p.4). Nigel Cross (2006), through his own empirical research, supports and elaborates upon Schön's conclusions. As Cross puts it, the problem space that a designer faces is rarely static, but rather "co-evolves" along with the solution space throughout the design process.

Schön argues that design can be understood as a "dialogue of prototype and site," where the term "dialogue" implies a kind of "reciprocal transformation" of both the designer's intentions and the design-in-progress (1992, p.11). As Schön sees it, the design process take on "the intimacy of a conversational relationship, where [the designer] is getting some response back from the medium, she is seeing what is happening" (1996, p.176). This conversational structure, which Schön refers to as "seeing-moving-seeing," is what allows designers to identify unforeseen problems and opportunities. In other words, the particular constraints of a design situation inspire and shape the design process in ways that cannot be known *a priori*.

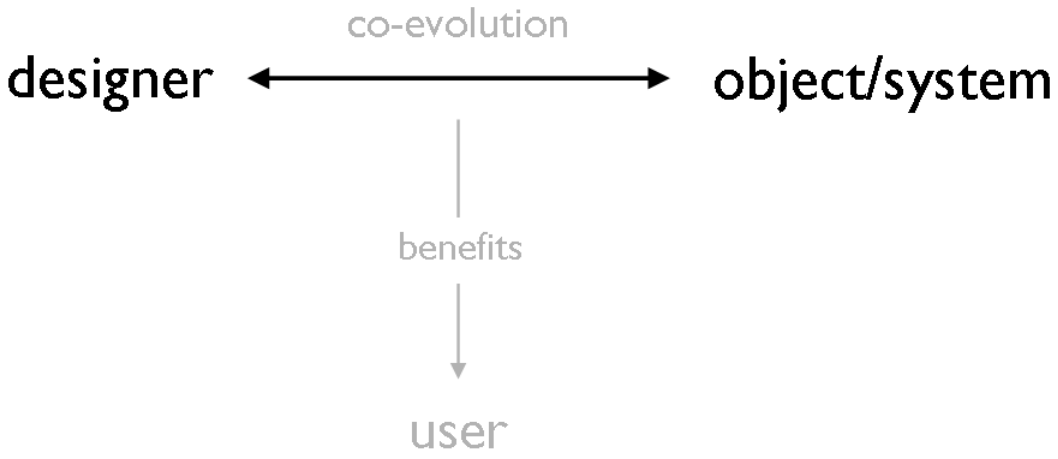

Figure 3 – Design as a "conversation with materials," as theorized by Donald Schön and Nigel Cross. This perspective focuses on the back-and-forth between designer and object.

In contrast to the rationalistic tradition, thinking about design as a "conversation with materials" calls explicit attention to the role of the human designer (Figure 3). For Schön, a key lesson is that we cannot hope to fully systematize away the artistic and intuitive working methods of designers. Dorst and Cross (2001), building on this perspective, argue that the element of surprise – a consequence of what Schön calls the "backtalk" from the design-in-progress – is what prevents "routine behavior" on the part of the designer.

This focus on designer and object is partly an artifact of the subject domain. Both Schön and Cross, in conversation with the rationalistic tradition, grapple with the question of how computers and artificial intelligence can or should aid design. Yet in terms of the relationship between object, designer, and user, it is the user that remains curiously absent from the discussion. It's not that Schön or Cross disavow the importance of user perspectives. Rather, their research interests are directed elsewhere, at describing the process of design and designer creativity.

Still, the absence of any explicitly user-focused perspective begins to affect how we talk about and conceptualize design. Cross, for example, declares: "What designers especially know about is the 'artificial world' – the human-made world of artifacts. […] Their knowledge, skills, and values lie in the techniques of the artificial" (2001, p.54). Phrased as such, knowledge of objects and materials trumps an understanding of the people who end up using the completed design. The object ends up eclipsing the user. How else, then, might we theorize the user in relation to the object and the designer?

User-centered design and the dialog between player and system

With a growing recognition that users can be complex, unpredictable, and difficult to design for, the design community has increasingly turned its attention to the user's point of view. Perhaps the best-known such perspective is that of "user-centered design," articulated by cognitive scientist Donald Norman in his 1988 book, *The Psychology of Everyday Things*.[1]

"Good design," Norman claims, "takes conscious attention to the needs of the user" (p.25). Norman urges designers to prioritize the user's needs and interests above all else, and to stay in tune with those needs by testing their designs on actual users. Framing design practice in terms of accountability, Norman argues that any "errors" made when using an object or system should be attributed not to the user, but to the design – and by extension, to the designer. Norman's advocacy for the user is motivated by his belief that better design can make the world a better place, that "proper design can make a difference in our quality of life" (p.216).

By and large, the literature on game design – particularly the wisdom found in game design textbooks – takes a similarly user-centered (or in this case, "player-centered") stance on design. Richard Rouse (2005) opens his textbook with the advice: "It may seem too simple a question to even ask, but determining what players want out of a game is a question all game designers must contemplate if they want to make great games" (p.1). Routinely, the role of the game designer is described as an "advocate" for the player. Tracy Fullerton (2008), for example, writes: "The role of the game designer is, first and foremost, to be an advocate for the player. The game designer must look at the world of games through the player's eyes" (p. 2). Chris Bateman and Richard Boon (2006) are even more insistent in their textbook, urging: "The audience's goal is to enjoy the game, and whatever else you do, you must satisfy this participant!" (p.9).

The user-centered design philosophy should be understood in historical context. Despite its limitations (as articulated below), user-centered design represents a noble effort to combat "bad habits" that designers sometimes develop. Norman, for instance, chides designers who "listen to their instincts instead of testing their ideas on actual users," reminding us that "designers know too much about their product to be objective judges" (p.vi). Especially in regard to the design of computer software, Norman sees a "general lack of concern for the users" (p.178), which he derides as inexcusable.

In the games industry, the call for a more explicitly user-centered approach to design is partly motivated by diversity issues. Ernst Adams (2006), for example, charges that most game designers primarily create games for themselves. He criticizes commercial game development as too often "guided by passion and instinct rather than professionalism and planning" (p.xiv). For Adams, the problem is that commercial games are homogenous, reflecting "the culture, worldview, and indeed prejudices of their makers" – which Adams identifies at "young white western men" (p.xv). In this view, user-centered design can be seen as a way of reaching other demographics.

Given this context, user-centered design can be seen as a kind of counterweighing theory – one that sets out to deflate the elevated status of the designer. This sentiment is clearly reflected in Norman's stern admonishment that designers work "not for the technology, not for themselves," but for their users (p.179). Bateman and Boon go even further, insisting that "Game design must be egoless, balancing the desires and needs of all participants" (p.8). They explain: "Saying that

[1] In subsequent editions, Norman's book has been re-titled as *The Design of Everyday Things*. It is the 1990 publication of this re-titled version that I cite throughout this paper.

the game designer's role should be egoless is in effect saying that the game designer doesn't reflect their personal needs in the design process" (p.9). Taken to such an extreme, user-centered design can be viewed as a purposeful effacement of the human beings behind the design.

Though user-centered design shifts the attention away from the designer, the designed things themselves remain on center stage. User-centered design, as typically formulated, is very much a perspective focused on objects and systems, almost as much as it is focused on the people using them. Tellingly, the original title of Norman's book is not "The Psychology of Everyday People," but rather "The Psychology of Everyday *Things*." Norman urges that the "system image" – the readily "visible" part of a device – should be a central concern of the design process. He writes: "the designer must ensure that everything about the product is consistent with and exemplifies the operation of the proper conceptual model" (p.190). Similarly, the art of game design is typically framed in the language of system design – in this case, systems engineered to satisfy player needs. Fullerton, for example, advises aspiring game designers to "try looking at the world in terms of its underlying systems" (p.8). Throughout her book, Fullerton places an emphasis on the formal properties of games, such as objectives, rules, and procedures.

The takeaway here is that the user-centered design perspective has done more than just shift the discussion from designer to user. More accurately, it has also shifted the discussion towards the *relationship between* user and object. Appropriating the notion of dialogue, Norman argues that action is ideally "part of a natural, constructive dialog between user and system" (p.200), where "dialog" should be understood as a kind of "cooperative endeavor between person and machine" (p.140). As Norman explains it, users formulate their mental model of an object or system through a back-and-forth, iterative cycle of experimentation and interpretation. The designer's task, then, becomes one of ensuring that users, through this process of experimentation, "form the correct interpretations, the correct mental models" (p.198).

In Norman's conceptualization of the design situation (Figure 4), "the designer doesn't talk directly with the user" (p.16). Rather, the system image, the design itself, serves as an intermediary for all communication between designer and user. The player-centric game design literature paints a similar picture, but with a slightly different emphasis (Figure 5). As conventional game design wisdom phrases it, designers orchestrate "player experiences." In this view, a game designer isn't able to "dictate exactly how the game should function," but is instead tasked with "building a potential experience, setting all the pieces in place so that everything's ready to unfold when the players begin to participate" (Fullerton, 2008, p.3). In both of the two conceptualizations of the design situation, the designer figures only very indirectly into the user experience. The real action, so to speak, happens between user and product.

Fullerton, echoing Norman, invokes the famous usability saying that "you don't come in the box" (p.252) – a truism aimed at reminding designers that their customers will have to figure out how to play the game on their own, without any special instruction. In one sense, this advice is certainly valuable. At least in regards to commercial game design, it's technically true that designer and user do not typically have the opportunity to speak with one another. Nonetheless, we should recognize that such a perspective draws our attention and our imagination towards the object itself, potentially overshadowing the people behind the design.

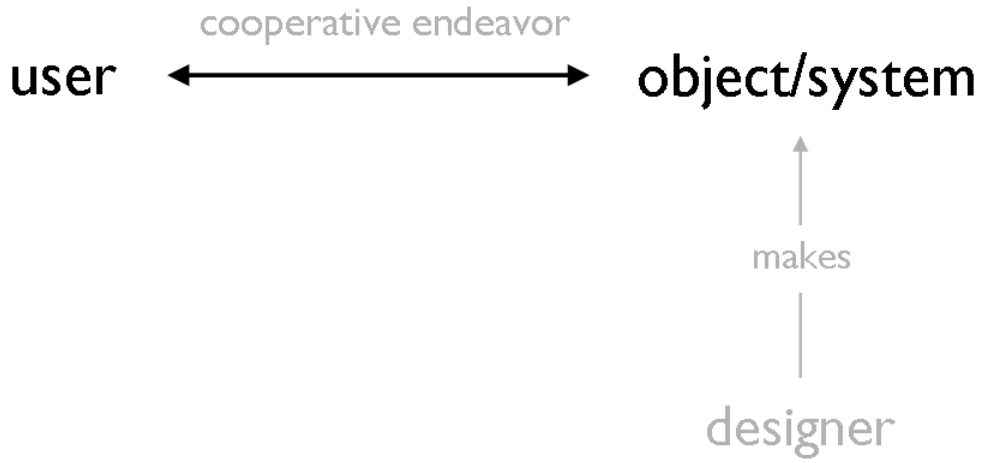

Figure 4 – Donald Norman's user-centered view of the design situation (p.16). This perspective focuses on the back-and-forth between user and object – specifically, on the user's conceptual model.

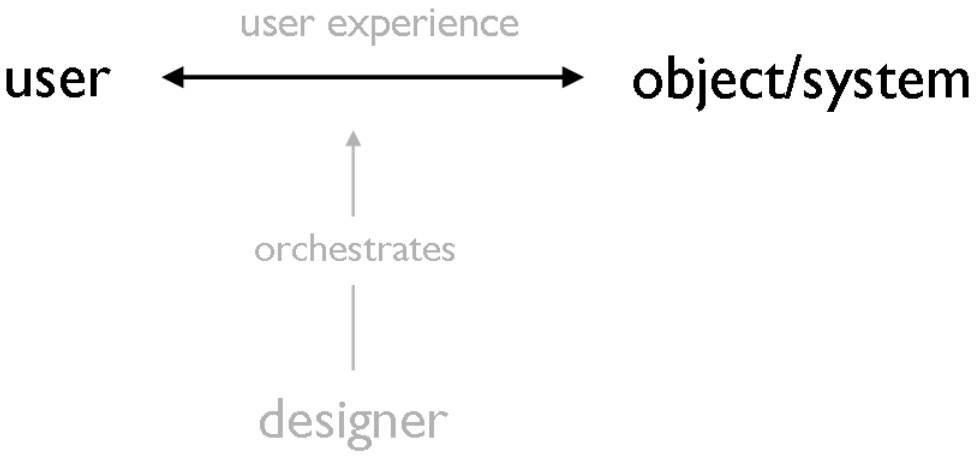

Figure 5 – The design situation as formulated by user-centered game design wisdom. This perspective, like Norman's, focuses on the back-and-forth between user and object, but is more geared towards the notion of designing a full "user experience."

As such, the user-centered design perspective, at least as formulated by Norman in *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, faces a limitation: its very literal, systems-framed approach is poorly equipped to deal with the kind of ephemeral meta-game sometimes cultivated by artifacts like *Kaizo Maro*. This limitation is reflected in Fullerton's ontology of "Player interaction patterns," which include relations like "Single Player vs. Game," "Player vs. Player," and "Team Competition" (p.52), but not the relation of "Player vs. Designer."

The problem with such a literal formulation of the design situation is that the formal properties of an object or system do not necessarily speak to felt experience of using that technology. As John McCarthy and Peter Wright (2004) argue, "the personal and particular character of experience with technology" (p.13) has too often been neglected in the design literature. Using text-messaging as an example, McCarthy and Wright write: "if our interests include how people feel about sending a text message, what participating in text-messaging culture does for their sense of self, and what values are implicated in texting, then Norman's model is seen to be lacking" (p.7). The designer may not actually come in the box, but as *Kaizo Mario* demonstrates, the player's felt experience might reflect a different reality.

Game design beyond usability

At issue here is not just any one particular formulation of user-centered design, but also the advantages and limitations of certain disciplinary traditions. In regards to user-centered design, we might question whether the conceptual framework of human computer interaction (HCI) always provides the most appropriate lens for thinking about design.

Kari Kuutti (2008), tracing the concept of "usability" back to the HCI research community, portrays the HCI and design disciplines as "uncomfortable bedfellows." As Kuutti sees it, the discipline of design encompasses not only concerns about functionality and understandability, but also questions of aesthetics, meaning, and felt experience. Kuutti writes that recent interest in the term "user experience" reflects a realization that "usability and utility alone are too narrow a perspective to understand the relation between humans and technology from a design point of view" (p.57).

Jonas Löwgren (2002) argues that design is fundamentally concerned with exploring possible futures. His critique of the HCI discipline is that "its focus on goals, tasks and usability makes it rather limited in terms of positive innovation" (p.186). Löwgren challenges the notion that interaction design is about "supporting" people. He asks the rhetorical question: "does it make sense to say that a computer game supports people?" (pp.186-187). Löwgren warns against conflating interaction design with HCI because doing so uncritically reifies an HCI perspective that users are goal-driven and that efficiency and understandability are necessarily desirable.

Even Norman himself recognizes these limitations of the usability perspective.[2] In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman explicitly focuses on "everyday activities," which he characterizes as tasks that "must usually be done relatively quickly, often simultaneously with other activities" (p.125). Despite this attention to goal-oriented tasks, Norman does recognize that there exist "recreational activities" – activities for those occasions "when we have the time and wish to

[2] In his 2004 book, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Thing*, Norman acknowledges his critics by paying more attention the importance of designing for fun and pleasure, beyond the "improved performance of tasks" (p.101). Exploring a space between art and design, Norman examines the ways in which objects impact our emotional lives.

expend the effort" (p.125). "Games," he acknowledges, are "a category in which designers deliberately flout the laws of understandability and usability" (p.205).

Or are they? Though games are supposed to be "difficult," traditional design wisdom suggests that games should only challenge players *just enough* to satisfy them within the bounds of their established tastes and skills. As Norman elaborates: "If a game isn't difficult enough, experienced players lose interest. On the other hand, if it is too difficult, the initial enjoyment gives way to frustration" (p.208). Games, in this view, are only supposed to be challenging in a user-friendly way; the logic of usability is very much still present. User-centered game design, as conventionally understood, adopts the HCI mindset of harnessing technology – in this case, well-balanced systems – to solve well-articulated, practical problems. For user-friendly game design practice, the question is how best to service the player's immediate desires and demands.

The limitation of such a mindset is that it is an inherently conservative strategy. As Bill Gaver (2008) argues, "technologies should not only reinforce pleasures that people know, but they should suggest new ones as well" (p.176). Gaver warns that designing for leisure – for those activities we really value – demands a fundamentally different approach than designing for the workplace: "Pursuing such an instrumental version of 'fun' does not help provide an alternative model for computing. On the contrary, it co-opts play into the same single-minded, results-oriented, problem-fixated mindset that we have inherited from the workplace" (p.166). Arguably, such instrumental perspectives on design neglect a much wider array of possible experiences.

Gaver advocates for a more playful approach to design – one which he calls "ludic design." As he sees it, this spirit of playfulness is not just a matter of user experiences, but can also color the attitude by which designers approach their work. Specifically, Gaver advocates for a more personal, idiosyncratic approach in which designers "seek a kind of empathy with the people and places for which they design, while maintaining their own sense of self" (p.176). Challenging the wisdom of user-centered design, he concludes: "Designers cannot simply efface themselves while seeking to fulfill people's articulated desires. Instead, we need to enter into a conversation with the situations for which we design, allowing ourselves both to affect and be affected by the interaction" (pp.176-177). Gaver's formulation of a ludic design practice is refreshing precisely because it suggests such a radically unconventional set of motivations. Of particular interest, the notion of "playfulness" provides an evocative conceptual framework for thinking about the design situation – a framework that manages to foreground both designer and user, together.

The opportunities and limitations of designing for reflection

In his book, *Hertzian Tales*, Anthony Dunne (2005) delineates another, similarly contrarian alternative to HCI and user-centered design. Dunne, like Gaver, is concerned that the mantra of user-friendliness has "spread to less utilitarian areas of our lives" (p.21). In particular, Dunne is sensitive to the ways in which consumer-oriented design marginalizes other possibilities. "There is a danger," he writes, "that if design is not oriented to the marketplace it is seen as invalid, irrelevant, or self-indulgent, especially if displayed in a gallery" (p.84). Dunne, drawing inspiration from humanistic traditions like critical theory, literature, and the arts, sets out to establish a practice of "critical design," resistant to and critical of more commercial contexts.

Dunne charges that consumer-oriented design creates objects to be "understood" rather than "interpreted.' This leads him to question whether the notion of user-friendliness is at all compatible with the kind of aesthetic experience offered by literature, poetry, and film. As Dunne sees it, the main assumption behind user-friendliness is the belief that "the way to humanize

technology is to close the gap between people and machines by designing 'transparent' interfaces" (p.21). His criticism is that this transparency helps "naturalize" electronic objects and the values and systems of thought that those objects embody. User-friendliness, in this view, obfuscates the fact that design is always ideological.

As a strategy for calling attention to the ideological content of design, Dunne proposes that we push design practice towards the deliberately user-*un*friendly. He frames user-unfriendliness "a form of gentle provocation" (p.35) that creates a "heightened sense of 'distance'" – either because "the objects do not work technically" or "preferably, because they are conceptually difficult to assimilate" (p.67). For Dunne, the goal is to get users to more consciously reflect on electronic objects and their role in everyday life. He writes: "By poeticizing the distance between people and electronic objects, sensitive skepticism might be encouraged, rather than unthinking assimilation of the values and conceptual models embedded in electronic objects" (p.22). Though Dunne admits that this critical approach can be alienating to some, he believes that it can be transformative for those people who are successfully engaged.

A concrete example of "critical design" is Dunne's Faraday Chair, a conceptual design project created to call attention to the difference between radio waves and human-visible light. The Faraday Chair is not actually a chair, but rather a small bed encased in a glass box. From a series of exhibition photos that depict the Faraday Chair in use, we can see that the box is just large enough to fit an adult user scrunched into fetal position. Somewhat disturbingly, the inhabitant gets their fresh air through a snorkel.

The Faraday Chair is not intended for practical use. Instead, it functions as a way of imagining a hypothetical space where humans could isolate themselves from electromagnetic space. As Dunne explains, "My proposed object for presenting a non-electronic, radio-free volume would use a faraday cage to show the ubiquitous nature of radio space and make perceptible the absence of radio. The object would ask: if the inside is empty, what is outside?" (p.143). In other words, the striking unusability of the design serves as a kind of provocation, aimed at getting viewers to reflect upon and reexamine their assumptions about electronic devices and everyday objects.

Like Dunne, design researchers Lars Hallnäs and Johan Redström (2000) challenge designers to "expose technology in a way that encourages people to reflect and think about it" (p.204). In place of Dunne's mantra of user-unfriendliness, Hallnäs and Redström advocate a consciously "slow" aesthetics of technology. They specify that slow technologies are not just "calm," but also "promote moments of reflection and mental rest in a more and more rapidly changing environment" (p.202). An example of slow technology is Redström's ChatterBox, a piece of "informative art" designed for the office. The ChatterBox "listens" for office emails and documents, recombines the words into new formulations, and then displays the results publicly for the entire office to view. Hallnäs and Redström explain that the ChatterBox is intended to function as a very slow tool for workplace awareness such that, over time, inhabitants would be able to gain an alternative understanding of what happens at the office. The authors emphasize that slow technology must be understood in terms of aesthetics, not just functionality. Reflection, as they see it, should be made inherent to the design expression.

Phoebe Sengers et al. (2005), drawing inspiration from these various critical, alternative approaches to design, advocate for what they call "reflective design." Reflective design, they explain, "is a set of design principles and strategies that guide designers in rethinking dominant metaphors and values and engaging users in this same critical practice" (p.57). They stress that critical reflection is "crucial to both individual freedom and our quality of life in society as a whole, since without it, we unthinkingly adopt attitudes, practices, values, and identities we might

not consciously espouse" (p.50). In this view, reflection is not just an important part of the design process, but also a key outcome. Sengers et al. emphasize that reflective design should support both designers *and* users in "ongoing critical reflection about technology and its relationship to human life" (p.50). To this end, they advise designers to provide for an interpretive flexibility that will allow the meaning-making process to be shared between user, system, and designer alike.

Designing for reflection, as theorized and practiced by researchers like Dunne, Redström, and Sengers, is both an evocative and a useful development in the design literature. The anti-consumerist bent of critical design opens up a welcome alternative to conventional design practice, while the attention given by reflective design to social, political, and ethical concerns helps sensitize designers and users to important and potentially neglected issues.

That said, Dunne's theory of a critical design is arguably a perspective more focused on objects than it is on people. Though Dunne wants to empower both user and designer in the meaning-making process, his theory is haunted by the thingness of the objects he discusses. The kinds of "poetic and metaphysical relationships" he hopes to establish are not primarily relationships with other people, but with "the artificial environment of technological artifacts" (p.xvi). On one hand, Dunne talks about providing "aesthetic experiences through the electronic *objects themselves*" (p.35, emphasis mine). On the other hand, he aims to "seduce the viewer into the world of ideas rather than objects" (p.147), shifting the emphasis "beyond the quality of our relationship with objects themselves to the aesthetics of the social, psychological, and cultural experiences they mediate" (p.xv). In short, the central dynamic of Dunne's critical design is the relationship between the material and the immaterial.

If design can be seen as a kind of conversation, then critical design is certainly not a very good one. Caught up in their own interpretations of the design-to-be-reflected-upon, designer and user may actually be talking past each other, not *to* each other. On one side of the design situation, the designer as "author" advances a seductive or surprising design that challenges an existing reality; on the other side, the user as "protagonist" builds their own narratives around the design – narratives that help color their everyday lives in new and poetic ways. Without any sort of feedback loop, there can be no dialogue, only two marginally related monologues. The result is that critical design privileges individual reflection at the expense of the *inter*personal.

Like critical design, the broader notion of designing for reflection prioritizes the issues and values to which its designs speak. After all, the term "reflection" implies that we have something to *reflect upon*. Writing in favor of critical reflection, Sengers et al. explain:

> Critical theory argues that our everyday values, practices, perspectives, and sense of agency and self are strongly shaped by forces and agendas of which we are normally unaware, such as the politics of race, gender, and economics. Critical reflection provides a means to gain some awareness of such forces as a first step toward possible change (p.50).

This push towards interpretative flexibility may place designer and user on a more equal footing, but the specter of reflection threatens to instrumentalize the entire design situation in service of these social, political, and ethical concerns (Figure 6). The individual human beings, both designer and user, are easily eclipsed by the societal-level issues at stake.

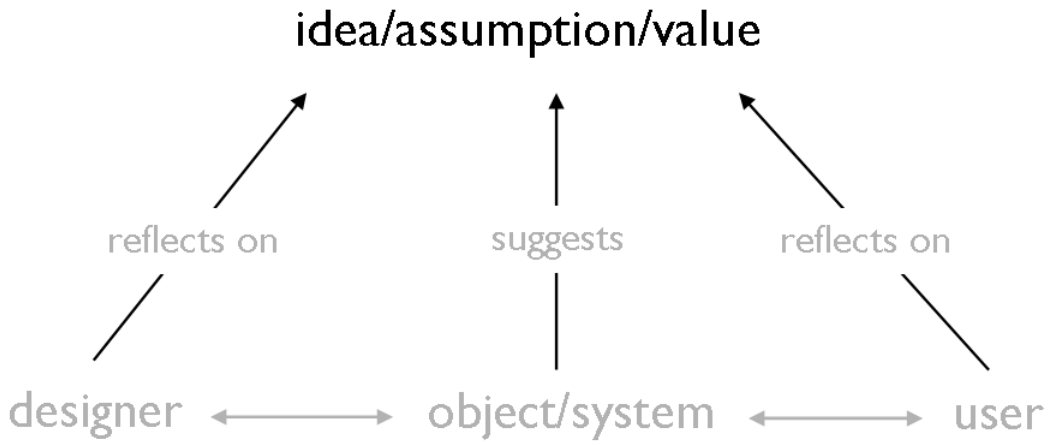

Figure 6 - The design situation, as oriented towards critical reflection. Both Dunne and Sengers et al. argue that reflection is important for designer and user alike, but the perspective is arguably geared towards the larger-scale political, social, and ethical concerns.

Part of the issue is that the term "reflection" carries with it the imagery of individual, solitary thought. As Sengers et al. admit, "It is easy to imagine 'reflective design' as a designer standing aloof, benignly passing down opportunities for reflection" (p.56). Recognizing this limitation, they ultimately suggest that designing for reflection might be more productively recast as designing for "reflection-in-action." Because critical reflection is most effective "when it is immediately folded back into our experiences, actions, identities, and practices," they urge designers to view reflection not as a stand-alone activity, but "as one component of a holistic experience which also includes ongoing activity" (p.56). They advocate "dialogic engagement between designers and users" (p.56) as one strategy for nurturing this reflection-in-action.

By "dialogic engagement," Sengers et al. seem to be alluding to methods that can be employed during the design process, such as cooperative design (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991), participatory design (Taylor, 2006) or cultural probes (Gaver et al., 1999). These kinds of methods are certainly valuable design tools, but as I argue in the next section, dialogic engagement can also be understood as an *aesthetic* – an engaging, felt experience of *using* a completed design.

3. Designer as player, dialogue as rivalry

Design, as conventionally understood, is a practice concerned with the making of things, be they objects or systems. No wonder, then, that the object figures so prominently in most formulations of the design situation. Almost by definition, design creates a *something* that mediates user experience, be that something material or immaterial. As such, it is difficult to think about how the user might interact more directly with the designer once the design itself is complete. The designer, remember, "doesn't come in the box." We face a kind of Catch-22: the product or thing that creates the occasion for bringing user and designer together is also the very entity that comes between the two. The thing being designed inevitably takes center stage.

Perhaps the very notion of "design," given all the imagery that term brings along with it, is fundamentally a self-defeating way of thinking, at least where the spirit of human-human togetherness is concerned. As an alternative, it may be more productive to think about the act of design more metaphorically, as a form of *gaming*. In this view, the designer is not so much a "designer" as they are an opponent or player in an ongoing game. The imagery of "gaming" speaks to a kind of interpersonal relation more direct, more agonistic.

Dialogic design represents an attempt to harness this metaphor of gaming. It is a perspective that deliberately calls attention to the designer and the user – or rather, the relation between them. Whereas Dunne's theory of critical design offers a "strategy for linking the immaterial and the material" (p.5), dialogic design advances a strategy for linking *the designer and the user*. In this formulation of the design situation, the design object is instrumentalized as a means of instigating a playful rivalry (Figure 7). Phrased differently, dialogic design can be viewed as a form of "meta-game design" – an attempt to kindle challenges or dares *around* design objects.

My suggestion is not that this "dialogue" is somehow unmediated, or that we can ignore the designed object altogether. To the contrary, successful dialogic designers, as we will see, often demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the materials and systems they utilize. My point is rather that "play," as a conceptual lens, foregrounds the people playing over any equipment or rules. The mantra of dialogic design functions as a reminder that designs objects are both made and used by particular human beings. It focuses our attention on the ephemeral meta-game between the people involved in the design situation.

The distinction between "traditional" and dialogic design is subtle, but real. It manifests itself in the way we talk about and think about design. When we play a single-player computer game, for instance, do we say that we "pwned" the game, or the designer? As I'll elaborate with a series of examples, certain designs in certain contexts prime us to think in terms of the latter – the meta-game against the designer. My aim in this paper is to better understand which design attributes and situations maximize our chances of conveying this kind of dialogic experience.

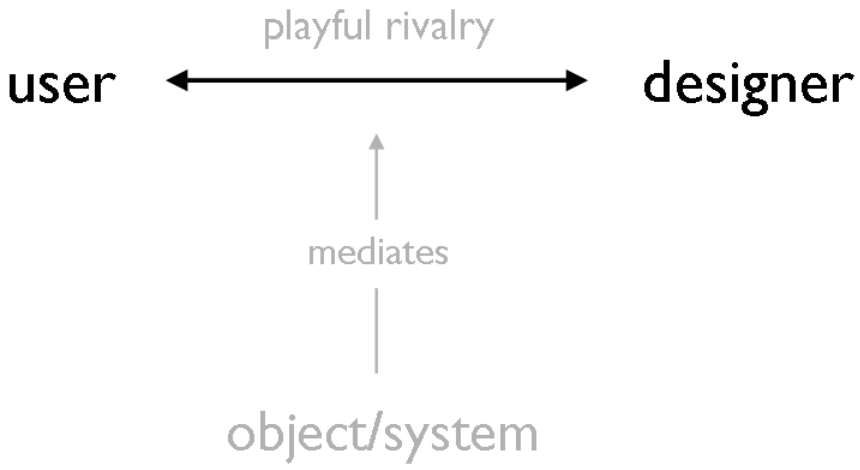

Figure 7 – The design situation, as formulated by the dialogic design approach. This perspective deliberately focuses on the relation between user and designer. The object is viewed as a means to an end - as mediating the ensuing rivalry.

Precedents of dialogic design

Dialogic design, understood as the quest for a more intense, more playful relationship between creator and audience, is by no means a fundamentally new idea. Before we examine some additional case studies from the game design world, I'd like to draw some lessons from two very different yet relevant precedents from traditions outside the design world: the detective fiction of Agatha Christie and the performance art of Marina Abramović. If dialogic design can be understood as a battle of wits and willpower between creator and audience, then Christie and Abramović explore the two extremities of that confrontation – Christie's work as a confrontation of wits, Abramović's work as a confrontation of willpower. Both creators provide evocative examples of dialogic engagement that have enjoyed critical and popular acclaim.

Agatha Christie's mystery novels as confrontation of wits

Agatha Christie (1890-1976), whose books have sold in the billions of copies, stands out as one of the most successful authors of all time. Her hallmark is her murder mysteries, which typically revolve around the sleuthing of fictional detectives like Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot. Technically speaking, Christie was a writer. Her lasting legacy, however, is her work as a puzzle-game designer. To understand Christie's success, one must understand the creativity with which she innovated the genre – a creativity which gives her puzzles a distinctly personal touch.

Christie, of course, was not the first author to approach detective fiction as a puzzle-game. As Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick (1982) observe in their study of Christie's work, "the puzzle is actually at the very heart of the detective story, it is the single factor which has remained constant in the continued development of the genre" (p.38). In Christie's work, however, the more traditionally "literary" elements are downplayed in favor of the ludic. Maida and Spornick observe: "Since *bloody* murder is not the rule in a Christie puzzle, details of the crime are given as succinctly and clinically as possible" (p.71). "Christie," they explain, "distances the reader from the garish effects of murder by focusing instead on 'whodunit' and engaging the reader in the pursuit of the murderer" (p.68). This emotional distancing between the reader and the characters deliberately works against any kind of full "immersion" in the world of the story. The primary focus is the game played *around* that world.

This detection game is a game played on multiple levels. In addition to the fictional game played between murderer and sleuth, there also exists the game played between author and reader.[3] The puzzle-game is not just a puzzle, but also a competition that involves multiple players. The sleuth's adversary is the murderer, while ours is the puzzle designer – Christie herself. Inherent to this game is the convention of "fair play." Christie, at least when she's at her best, offers enough subtle clues for the astute reader to solve the mystery, but not enough to spoil the fun. It is not enough to merely watch the detective solve the crime. A puzzle-game designer like Christie must give readers ample opportunity to play the game themselves.

Admittedly, it could be argued that any "fair" detective story offers a competition between author and reader. What distinguishes Christie – what gives her work its dialogic quality – is the sheer cleverness of the twists that she so elegantly used to turn the genre on its head. Maida and

[3] Detective fiction is not the only example of literature which blurs the boundary between narrative and agonistic contest with the reader. Kathleen Blake (1974), examining the role of play, games, and sport in the literary works of Lewis Carroll, describes several cases in which Carroll presents a "curious hybrid of mathematics and narrative" (p.41).

Spornick write: “Christie’s puzzles are rendered in a basically traditional manner, yet with a uniqueness that reflects the author’s personal and aesthetic values […] the detective story is of necessity formulaic, Christie invents imaginative variations to the basic formula” (p.79). In *Murder on the Orient Express*, for instance, Christie plays “with basic triad of victim, murderer, sleuth” (p.81). As it turns out, all twelve suspects are together guilty of the murder. Perhaps more famous is Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), in which the book’s *narrator*, Dr. Sheppard, turns out to be the murderer.[4] Dr. Sheppard never presents any false information, but instead glosses over certain key periods of time. The trick is to ask what Christie is *not* telling us.

Solving these more unconventional of Christie’s puzzles requires more than just a keen intellect; the game is also very much a psychological one. To deduce the identity of the murderer, the reader must not only consider the psychology of the possible suspects, but also of Christie *herself*. As such, Christie’s puzzles should not just be viewed in isolation, but in the context of her entire oeuvre. “Devotees of Christie,” Maida and Spornick point out, “tend to expect certain kinds of clues, just as they look forward to favored settings and recognizable characters. In fact, part of the allure of the game is the element of expectation” (p.79). A key pleasure of reading Christie is getting to know how her mind works, and then leveraging that familiarity when tackling her puzzles. Yet Christie’s work cannot be reduced to a predictable formula. As Maida and Spornick warn, “familiarity often handicaps the reader whose assumptions may easily lead him astray” (p.83). Christie strives to stay one step ahead of the reader.

Bernard Suits (1985) therefore gets it wrong when he describes the detective story as a “two-move” game. Suits, like Maida and Spornick, points out that authors like Christie are not only constructing a game for their readers, but are also playing one with them. Suits argues that the detective story is a two-move game since the reader either succeeds or fails in solving the mystery: “It is a two-move, nonturntaking game (where by taking turns I mean that each player has the opportunity to make the same move). One pitch and one swing. One thrust and one parry, but no counter-thrust. One service and one attempted return, but no rally” (p.204). This evaluation fails to acknowledge two key aspects of the detective story genre. First, the reader continues to refine their guess as the novel progresses and the author provides more clues. The earlier the reader is able to deduce the solution, the more satisfying. Second, mystery novels are often read in relation to one another, not just in isolation. Arguably, each novel of an author’s oeuvre functions as a kind of additional counter-move. Suits fails to adequately account for the more ephemeral “meta game” engendered by an oeuvre like Christie’s.

The takeaway lesson is that Christie’s work cannot be fully appreciated in isolation, as some standalone product of a single genius. Indeed, the puzzle-games themselves tell only half the story. In *And Then There Were None* (1939), Christie seems to admit as much herself. At the very end of the story, the novel’s murderer reveals the shocking “howdunit” of his elaborate crime in a posthumous letter to Scotland Yard. The culprit explains:

> It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve. But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid. I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that someone should know just how clever I have been… (p.182)

[4] This twist is so famous that the term “ackroydism” has emerged as a generic descriptor for such devices.

Here Christie is essentially addressing the reader directly, apologizing for the *deus ex machina* of such an ending. Christie is acknowledging that she, like the murderer writing the letter, requires the audience of an engaged opponent. Her cleverness can only be fully consummated by a worthy adversary – a Kiba to her Takemoto, so to speak.

Marina Abramović's performance art as confrontation of willpower

Agatha Christie's clever puzzle-games demonstrate an approach to dialogic engagement that is decidedly cerebral. Yet dialogue as a felt experience need not always be so heady. The confrontational performance art of Marina Abramović aims to provoke a response more immediately emotional and raw. In relation to design theory, Abramović's art presents a provocative vision of how creative practice might minimize the mediating role of objects in favor of foregrounding the interchange between creator and audience.

Abramović is perhaps most famous for her controversial performances in which she deliberately places herself in grueling and potentially harmful situations. In *Rhythm 0* (1975), for instance, she remained still for six hours, inviting the audience to manipulate her body however they wanted. On a table she laid out seventy-two items such as a pen, lipstick, olive oil, a Polaroid camera, chains, and a pistol and bullet. Only a few hours into the piece, the audience had already undressed her and written on her body. Eventually, the gallery was engulfed in a heated argument when the loaded gun was placed in Abramović's hand and pointed at her neck. Suddenly, the audience was confronted with an ethical crisis, and an imperative to intervene.

As her biographer James Westcott (2010) sees it, the point of this self-inflicted suffering is that it puts her in a situation where she needs the audience to reciprocate – to sustain her with their empathy. In *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), Abramović lived, slept, and fasted in the Sean Kelly Gallery for twelve days, in a makeshift house of three open-faced boxes. Abramović's instructions to the audience were to "establish energy dialogue with the artist" (p.1). This energy, Westcott explains, is drawn "from the public for the transcendence of her personal limitations" (p.275). Central to this dialogic engagement is eye contact. As Westcott phrases it, "It is Abramović's nourishment and the audience's addiction" (p.2).

Underlying these performances, and Abramović's oeuvre more generally, is the desire to transcend the conventional art object in favor of a more unmediated aesthetic experience. For Abramović, the "direct transmission of energy" (p.189) promises an art of the twenty-first century. In her performances, the notion of "content," as a formal property of art objects, is downplayed in order to foreground social context and interpersonal relations. Abramović's performance in *The House with the Ocean View*, for example, was not exactly "about" any particular issue or set of questions. Rather, it was geared towards evoking a raw feeling of empathy. Identifying the human body as a key strategy for provoking minimally mediated aesthetic experiences, Abramović and Ulay (her partner of the time) write in their 1980 "Art Vital" manifesto: "Immaterially transmitted energy causes energy as a dialogue, from us to the sensibility and mind of eye witness who becomes an accomplice. We chose the body as the only material which can make such an energy dialogue possible" (p. 148).

Figure 8 – Abramović performing *The Artist is Present* (2010) at New York City's Museum of Modern Art. (Photo via Andrew Russeth / Flickr).

One especially literal example of this foregrounding of human bodies is Abramović's, *Imponderabilia* (1977), in which she and Ulay stood completely nude in the entrance to the Galleria Communale d'Arte Moderna. Visitors had to awkwardly squeeze between the two naked bodies in order to enter. Here again, social context is brought to the fore. Playing on social norms and cultural taboos – especially within the "high culture" context of an art gallery – the piece was clearly designed to provoke an emotional response.

The successfully dialogic qualities of Abramović's art stand out even clearer when we compare performances like *Imponderabilia* to her more traditionally theatrical work. *Positive Zero* (1983), for instance, featured a series of elaborate tableaux play-acted by Tibetan lamas and Aboriginals specially commissioned for the performance. As Westcott criticizes, "The work was too interpretable; it had none of the raw and blunt madness of the earlier performances" (p.178). Abramović's *Biography* (1992), a dramatized story of her life featuring edited re-performances of old works, received similar criticisms. Westcott writes, "It was embarrassing, messy, massively self-indulgent, wishful, shameful, redressive, and iconoclastic – shattering the tenets of performance art that she used to hold dear" (p. 231). The argument is that the elaborately staged, narcissistic qualities of pieces like *Positive Zero* and *Biography* stunted the confrontational two-way interactions upon which her earlier work had thrived.

Abramović's more recent work, however, has strongly re-embraced the notion of reciprocality.[5] Writing to curator Klaus Biesenbach, Abramović's explained, "I want to have a work that

[5] Of her work since the 1990s, Westcott summarizes, "[she] was starting to demand a covenant relationship with her audience. They were expected to put in a similar – though never possibly equal – amount of concentration when watching the work as Abramović put in when making it" (p.249).

connects me more with the public, that concentrates… on the interaction between me and the audience" (as quoted in Danto, 2010). That work would eventually become *The Artist is Present* (2010), performed daily at New York's Museum of Modern Art for over two months. The piece, based off her earlier *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987), had Abramović sit silently facing an empty chair. Museum goers could then queue up to sit in that chair facing Abramović for as long as they wanted (or at least until closing time). Like *The House with the Ocean View*, *The Artist is Present* is an endurance feat that aims to create empathy through wordless, dialogic eye contact.

In another view, *The Artist is Present* is a kind of twisted game – a tragic staring contest in which the audience participant is destined to lose.[6] Likewise, some of her other performances feel like endurance contests played by Abramović against some opponent, be that herself, Ulay, the audience, and/or some unspecified opponent-at-large. Westcott comments:

> The pain, the endurance, the absurdity, the experimentation with fanatical, monstrous control and total, humble surrender – it was all a way of rejecting the implacable *givenness* of life, asserting her will against the body and the existence she found herself thrown into. Her actions were a kind of revenge against life (p.245, emphasis his).

In this sense, Abramović is not only the designer, but also a *player* of her own punishing games. It is precisely this blurring of the line between artist and viewer, between designer and player, that empowers us to feel like we are "testing" her – and, hopefully, to empathize with her too.

Kaizo Mario: Strong-form and weak-form dialogic design

Kaizo Mario, as discussed in the introduction, offers one model of what a "dialogic" design might look like in regard to videogames. Moreover, it underscores how dependent dialogic design is on context and audience. For different players, the game is "dialogic" in different ways.

The infamous videos of R. Kiba playing *Kaizo Mario* originally appeared in 2007 on Niconico, a Japanese video sharing site.[7] They were later trans-coded to YouTube by Kevin "sibladeko" O'Young. Framing the videos for the English-speaking world, O'Young (2010) decided to call the videos "Asshole Mario." O'Young's videos quickly attracted attention; as of July 2010, the "Asshole Mario Stage 1" video alone enjoys over 2.6 million views (Kiba and Takemoto, 2007a).[8]

[6] Fittingly, the piece has even inspired a cheeky computer game "simulation" (by Pippin Barr, also titled *The Artist Is Present*, 2011) in which the player must wait in a virtual line to see a virtual Abramović.

[7] The mod itself can be traced back to a Japanese website, now defunct:
http://web.archive.org/web/20080224201125/http://pokoweb.com/pds/434451/kaizomario

The mod file continues to propagate across the web. For example, the game can be found here:
http://lparchive.org/LetsPlay/Kaizo/

[8] In addition to its success as an Internet phenomenon, a second legacy of *Kaizo Mario* has been the visibility it has given to the world of *Super Mario World* hacks and mods. "Hacking" *Super Mario World* to create custom levels and games has become popular enough that thriving web communities have arisen around the practice. For example, SMW Central (http://www.smwcentral.net) gives *Super Mario World* mod creators a forum for sharing and discussion.

Contextualized as "Asshole Mario," the *Kaizo Mario* videos conjure imagery of an "evil," sadistic designer. Though we might not know the creator T. Takemoto personally, the very way the game is framed immediately draws us to imagine the twisted "asshole" who presumably made the game. One viewer muses: "The only person who really had lots of lols from this is proly the creator... laughing all the way to the end of creating each level imagining how people will suffer in the future playing it" (hl2og, 2009). Another viewer quips: "Some sadistic bastard wrote this level. I bet he likes punching puppies, too" (marks47, 2009). The YouTube comments are flooded with similar remarks, likewise fixated on the imagined mastermind behind the game.

Takemoto comes across as such an "asshole" not just because his levels are difficult, but because they are also hilariously *cruel*. His levels routinely violate unwritten rules about good practice level design. In the very first moments of the first level, for example, a swarm of enemies come flying at Mario. The uninitiated player will almost certainly die immediately. In *Kaizo Mario*, unlike in most games, there are no warm-up periods. The confrontation starts from the get-go.

Takemoto's signature move is his use of invisible blocks – obstacles that only appear when it's too late to avoid them. Takemoto shows a knack for placing these blocks in the exact right (or rather, wrong) spots, precisely where the player would naturally jump. Even worse, these blocks are typically placed at the end of difficult sequences, with success tauntingly close in reach. To watch someone else fall for such a trap is pure comedy; to suffer the trap yourself is enraging.

Most memorable are the handful of innovative traps that are as creative as they are cruel. In Stage 10, for example, an unspecting player will complete the level only to fall into a pit during the victory animation. As it turns out, the player can only prevent this seemingly inevitable death by hitting a special hidden switch right before completing the level. This twist is so shocking (and so funny) because in the original game, the victory animation functions as a safe period. That Takemoto even realized that Mario is able to die during the victory animation shows how well he must know the *Super Mario World* engine. As O'Young comments in the video description: "This one had me dying of laughter. Maybe not the hardest, but definitely the most assholeish" (Kiba and Takemoto, 2007c). It's exactly this combination of cleverness and audaciousness that calls attention to the person behind the design. Creative genius, after all, is very personalizing.

"Asshole Mario" moniker aside, the game's original title is actually *jisaku no kaizou Super Mario World o tomodachi ni play saseru*, which roughly translates as "I make my friend play my Super Mario World hack." This image, of a designer custom-tailoring a game to torment his friend, is the game's hallmark. The challenge posed by *Kaizo Mario*, at least for its original recipient, is a deeply personal one. But the rivalry between designer, T. Takemoto, and player, R. Kiba, is also a kind of partnership – a joint performance. Though Takemoto alone is credited for the editing, the videos are more generally credited to both of them, together. As O'Young (2010) tells it, "there were a lot of moments that felt like [Takemoto and Kiba] were putting on a show."

It's possible that the story of Takemoto and Kiba is apocryphal. The name "R. Kiba," for instance, is likely a pseudonym, a pun on the Japanese slang *akiba*.[9] Nonetheless, for our purposes here, the key takeaway is that such a designer-player relationship is both plausible and evocative. We can certainly imagine making such a game for one of our own friends.

[9] The term *akiba* is roughly equivalent in meaning to the term *otaku*, which connotes a kind of obsessive videogame or manga geek.

Figure 9 – *Kaizo Mario*, Stage 1. Bucking traditional usability conventions, the game sets a trap for the player in the very first moments of the first level. (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007a).

Figure 10 – *Kaizo Mario*, Stage 10. Mario falls to his death during the victory animation. (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007c).

From the perspective of Kiba – the player for whom the game was supposedly designed (assuming he does exist) – *Kaizo Mario* is "dialogic" in a literal sense. Kiba is performing directly for Takemoto, who has the privilege of observing his design in use. Kiba's personal relationship with Takemoto enables a kind of two-way exchange in which Kiba is given the opportunity to reciprocate through the act of gameplay. In fact, the feedback loop might have been even tighter. According to O'Young (2010), the original Niconico videos were released serially, on a weekly basis. This raises the possibility that Takemoto actually created each level one at a time, allowing him to respond to how Kiba had fared in the previous week's level.

For the rest of us, the situation is considerably different. Obviously, the majority of players who stumble upon *Kaizo Mario* won't know the designer, or even speak the same language. Unlike Kiba, we are denied the satisfaction of Takemoto's acknowledgement when we beat his twisted challenges. Technically speaking, *Kaizo Mario* can, for us, be viewed as a strictly one-way affair. We have little hope of closing any sort of feedback loop with Takemoto himself.

But when we conquer one of Takemoto's obstacles or avoid falling for one of his traps, it can certainly *feel* as if we've defeated the designer. It is precisely because the game is so playfully cruel that it coaxes us to take the designer's challenges very personally. In this view, playing *Kaizo Mario* becomes an imaginary dialogue with a distant adversary who looms over our every action. When making such a game, the designer tries to anticipate our actions. When playing such a game, we try to prove the "asshole" designer wrong. Thus, the dialogic designer strives to stay one step ahead of their adversary-to-be, be that adversary a specific friend or an imagined end-user. Because the designer knows that we know that he knows this, reverse psychology cedes to reverse reverse psychology and so on.[10]

Understood as a battle of wits, this reverse reverse psychology echoes the clever puzzle-games that Agatha Christie uses to tease, outsmart, and ultimately entertain her readers. At the same time, the game, much like Marina Abramović's most successful interactive performances, requires sufficient daring and endurance. To make any progress in *Kaizo Mario*, the player must be both patient and highly skilled. They must be ready to learn from their mistakes, and willing to practice difficult sequences again and again.[11] This kind of adversarial relation between player and designer, at least when framed the proper way in the proper context, can engender a distinct feeling of reciprocity, regardless of how reciprocal the relation actually is.

[10] For instance, take the underwater passageway obstacle described in the introduction. We might criticize Takemoto for making that trap too obvious. Perhaps an even more devilish design would have been to place the Bullet Bill enemy underneath the passageway in the alternate, seemingly "secret" route, stymieing those players tricked into thinking that they had outsmarted the designer.

[11] In the "Asshole Mario" videos, Kiba seems to be playing the game without any special save functionality, such that he has to restart from the previous checkpoint whenever he dies. However, it is worth noting that many players take advantage of emulator save states, which effectively allow them to restart the level from any previous point of their choosing. Save states let players to practice specific jumps and sequences over and over again in a quicker succession, and spares them the trouble of having to repeat parts of the level they have already beaten. Arguably, this shortcut qualifies as a form of "cheating," diluting the intended frustration of *Kaizo Mario*. But we might also counter-argue that save states open up the game to a broader audience, making the game somewhat more accessible to players who aren't as skillful as Kiba. Even with save states, *Kaizo Mario* is still a punishingly difficult game. For a longer discussion on cheating and game augmentation, see Consalvo, 2007.

For Kiba, *Kaizo Mario* facilitates a kind of literal back-and-forth that we might label as "strong-form" dialogic design. For the rest of us, this back-and-forth might only be figurative, but can be compelling nonetheless. We might label this second situation as "weak-form" dialogic design. In a weak-form dialogic design, the adversarial mind-game effectively plays out twice – once in the designer's imagination, and then again in the user's imagination. The more literally reciprocal the designer-user relationship is, the closer these two meta-games – or rather, these two different takes on the same meta-game – will correspond to one another. The categories of weak-form and strong-form dialogic design exist not as a binary, but as ends of a spectrum.

What all dialogic designs share in common is that they call attention to the human being behind the design – the proverbial wizard-behind-the-curtain. More essentially, dialogic design foregrounds the *relationship between* designer and user. To achieve this effect, dialogic design relies on a sense of perceived intentionality. By "perceived intentionality," I mean that the user perceives the designer's challenges to be purposeful and premeditated, rather than accidental. To be sure, this distinction is a highly subjective one. Nevertheless, that perception of purposefulness is what enables the sense of mutuality upon which any dialogue relies. After all, there isn't much reason to start a dialogue when the other person barely even acknowledges you.

A brief comparison may help drive this point home. *Battletoads* (1991), for instance, is another, quintessential example of an old videogame that is manically difficult. Yet for me, *Battletoads* feels more "buggy" than it does purposefully designed.[12] By contrast, when I play *Kaizo Mario*, I feel the presence of the designer – that whoever made the game is specifically "out to get me." This perception is partly a matter of consistency and, as I will argue later, context. At almost every turn, *Kaizo Mario* bucks common usability conventions in very showy ways.

A game system that is woefully imbalanced by accident is often frustrating, but a game that appears *intentionally* imbalanced can be something more. Namely, the perception of intentionality opens up the possibility of a meta-game. *Kaizo Mario* begins to feel like a dialogue when we experience the presence of an adversary who deliberately (and playfully) has it out for us. We imagine the person behind the game, and thereby take their provocations personally.

Three Considerations for Dialogic Design Practice

In this section, I outline three specific features to consider when practicing dialogic design: surprise, humor, and context. While not exhaustive, this set of considerations points towards several promising design strategies for instigating a playful rivalry between designer and user. All three features are deeply intertwined with one another, but are nevertheless articulated separately here in the hopes of offering design takeaways that are both concrete and evocative.

[12] *Battletoads* is frequently remembered as one of the most difficult games of its age (see Buchanan, 2009). The game is infamous for allowing players to injure not just the enemies, but also each other. Moreover, the American version of the game suffers from a number of bugs. Level 11, for example, fails to support the game's two-player mode. At the beginning of the level, the second player will inevitably end up losing all of their lives before the other player is able to proceed (see de Almeida Azevedo Junior, 2005).

Surprise

Successful dialogic design manages to draw the user's attention to circumstances surrounding a use experience – more specifically, to the people (or imagined people) behind the design. This is not a trivial feat. On an emotional level, the user must first be drawn into the meta-game around the designed thing. Then, they must continuously be reminded of that ongoing back-and-forth. It's for this reason that the element of surprise is such a useful tool for dialogic design practice.

As means of provoking surprise, the traps that Takemoto sets in *Kaizo Mario* are comparable to the puzzle-games that Agatha Christie constructs in her mystery novels. Much like the infamous resolution of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (discussed above), Takemoto's traps are so memorable because they challenge our unquestioned assumptions. Furthermore, Christie's and Takemoto's twists maintain their own mischievous internal logic. They don't feel arbitrary. This mixture of shock and plausibility creates a type of surprise that heightens our anticipation of what might follow. In turn, this anticipation sustains the back-and-forth of the dialogic exchange.

Mike O'Reilly's *I Wanna Be The Guy* (2007) provides a second example of a game that relies heavily on the pleasure of surprise. Much like *Kaizo Mario*, *I Wanna Be The Guy* is a notoriously difficult platformer game that is designed to toy with the player at every turn. At one particularly memorable point in the game, the music suddenly stops and a seemingly genuine Windows error message pops up as if the game had crashed. Moments later, the message box falls downwards, suddenly becoming a dangerous in-game obstacle. O'Reilly (2007), writing about the challenge of staying one step ahead of his players, explains, "I must keep the player on their toes and yet still have to surprise them when they're most alert."[13]

In the gaming community, irreverent and purposefully difficult platformer games like *Kaizo Mario* and *I Wanna Be The Guy* have become so popular that they have even earned their own subgenre label – "masocore" games (see Anthropy, 2008). Although masocore games provide a compelling case study in dialogic design practice, their limitations serve as a useful reminder that dialogic design, by its very nature, transcends genre or formula. In a world crowded with so many "abusive" platformers, the same design tricks get repeated again and again (see Wilson & Sicart, 2010). The subgenre as a whole begins to feel worn-out.

Kaizo Mario in particular has inspired by a slew of like-minded sadistic *Super Mario World* mods, some which engineer even harder challenges. Despite this flood of imitators, none of them have duplicated the *je ne sais quoi* of *Kaizo Mario*.[14] The lesson here is that originality is an

[13] The notion of "surprise" also resonates within the broader design research literature. Bill Gaver and colleagues (2009), writing about the struggle to reconcile deliberately provocative design practices with traditional notions of success and failure, argue that "successful" systems are those "which continue to occasion new surprises and new insights over the course of encounters with them" (pp.2219-2220).

[14] Some other notoriously difficult *Super Mario World* mods include *Impossible Levels* (see AsunaNegiKota, 2007) and *Super Kusottare World* (see ilovelaurenp, 2008). Other mods, especially those designed for "tool-assisted" play, are difficult to the point of absurdity. Examples include *Pit of Despair* (see MoltovMarioWorld, 2008) and *Item Abuse* (see dainegai, 2009). These mods take advantage of obscure quirks of the game system and typically require the player to run the game in slow motion. Describing one of many *Super Mario World* bugs exploited by the *Item Abuse* mod, one commentator explains: "If you run into a wall fast enough while descending, there's a slight chance you will catch the sixteenth pixel of the block in the wall, making the game read Mario as on the ground for one frame" (dainegai, 2009). My own read is that these tool-assisted mods feel less like invitations to engage in a back-and-forth with the designer and more like in-depth explorations of the *Super Mario World* game system.

essential component of dialogic game designs. Without it, it is difficult to shift the player's attention away from the system itself and towards the back-and-forth transpiring *around* that game. As I have also argued elsewhere (Wilson & Sicart, 2010), dialogic game designers would do well to search out under-explored genres that can afford new opportunities for surprise.

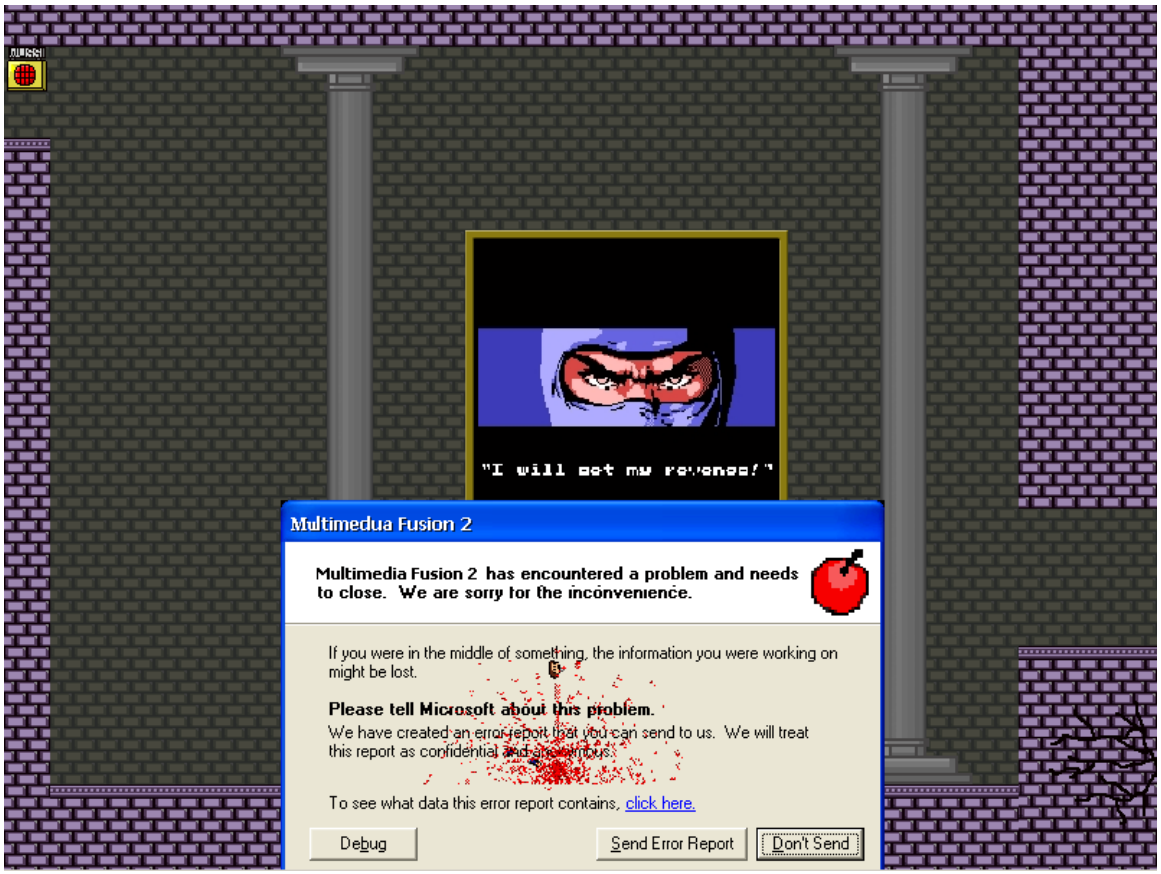

Figure 11 – A false error message kills the player in *I Wanna Be The Guy* (2007). (Screenshot via Nuklear Power Forums: http://www.nuklearforums.com/showpost.php?p=873687&postcount=276).

Humor

A game like *Kaizo Mario* thrives on a particular type of humor – a humor of the absurd. The game not only breaks conventions, but breaks them in self-consciously absurd ways, forcing the player into amusingly awkward, slapstick situations.[15] One particularly memorable example is the juggling puzzle towards the end of *Kaizo Mario 2* (the sequel, also designed by T. Takemoto)

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[15] Tim Schafer, a celebrated designer of comedy-adventure titles, identifies a strong link between surprise and comedy: "The thing that's more important than anything else to my mind […] is just the element of surprise. […] It's the essence of really fun entertainment to me. It gets into our puzzles, too – like, 'What does the player think is going to happen here? There's a door and there's a lock. That's too obvious. What else can we do?'" (Ingham, 2011). Here, Schafer is pointing out that humor can be understood a special type of surprise – one that is particularly effective at drawing users into a dialogic relation.

Stage 9 (Kiba and Takemoto, 2007d). In this sequence, the player is tasked with transporting two different items – a baby Yoshi and a volatile blue block – while riding a moving platform. The solution is to *juggle* those two items in air. This contorted game-within-a-game is not just wonderfully clever; it also, in a rather literal sense, positions the player as a performing clown.

Another key property of humor that makes it such a mainstay of dialogic design is its deeply personalizing qualities. An excellent (and commercial) example is Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2004), designed and written by author Douglas Adams together with Steve Meretzky.[16] The game is legendary for its warped sense of humor and oddball puzzles that require players to think "outside the box." To succeed, we not only have to learn how Adams and Meretzky "think" – more specifically, we must also understand their sense of humor.

One good example is an infamous sequence in which the player must argue with the game system itself. Each time the player tries to "go aft" towards the Infinite Improbability Drive chamber, the text parser warns against it, going as far as to reject the command. The player is forced to insist on the command "go aft" with repeated inputs. On the third attempt, the game cheekily replies:

> I can tell you don't want to really. You stride away with a spring in your step, wisely leaving the Drive Chamber safely behind you. Telegrams arrive from well-wishers in all corners of the Galaxy congratulating you on your prudence and wisdom, cheering you up immensely.

Only on the fifth try does the parser finally acquiesce. Even then, however, the game continues to mislead the player, reporting that "Nothing happens; there is nothing to see." Only after repeatedly insisting upon the "look" command does the player finally get to see the Infinite Improbability Drive chamber. The chamber turns out to be perfectly safe, of course.

Henning Eichberg (2010), writing on the close relationship between play, festivity, and humor, argues that laughter has a deeply relational quality to it: "Laughter is also a way of saying 'you'. Its bodily expression is a convulsive interaction, reciprocity from face to face, from body to body. Laughter is catching; it is infectious between you and me" (p.197). In this passage Eichberg is speaking about co-located, multiplayer folk games. Nevertheless, even a putatively single-player game like *Kaizo Mario* or *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* exhibits these relational qualities, positioning the designer as Eichberg's 'you.' As Dormann and Biddle (2009) argue in their work on humor and computer games, "Humor has a social role noticeably like small talk." They continue: "It greases the wheels of conversation, plays a transitional role, and provides a conventional way for people to drive forward in dialogues" (p.812). Humor, when utilized correctly, can drive that dialogue towards the meta-game, at the person(s) *behind* the game.

A very literal example of this relational use of humor can be found in the way *Kaizo Mario* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* explicitly taunt the player. A number of *Kaizo Mario* levels contain special dialog boxes that the player can hit to trigger a textual message from Takemoto. Sometimes, the text contains a tip or hint. Other times, Takemoto takes the opportunity to make fun of the player. At the end of *Kaizo Mario 2* Stage 9, an unwitting player is likely to trap themselves on a platform that slides past the level goal, to an inescapable dead-end. A dialogue box at this dead-end reads "You die!" (in Japanese). To add insult to injury, a giant kanji that translates as "The End" is written out in grey blocks above the trap.

[16] Though *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was originally released by Infocom in 1984, I myself have only played the 20th anniversary re-release of the game. It is that version which I cite in this article.

Figure 12 – *Kaizo Mario 2*, Stage 9. Somewhat humorously, the player is forced to "juggle" the block and the Baby Yoshi in order to transport both of them over the ravine. (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007d).

Figure 13 – *Kaizo Mario 2*, Stage 9. A giant kanji reading “The End” taunts the player about their imminent demise (Footage from Kiba and Takemoto, 2007d).

Figure 14 – Photograph of one of the physical items ("feelies") included in the *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* game box. The Microscope Space Fleet, like most of the included extras, is a not-so-subtle gag. (Photo via *The Infocom Gallery*).

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Adams and Meretzky tease the player in a very similar fashion. If the player allows the protagonist's house to be bulldozed prematurely, they suffer a death by flying brick. Typically, the player would be able to restart the game immediately. In this case, however, the player's body is taken by an ambulance, and the player must wait several turns before any command (including "restart") is accepted. Any input results in taunts like "You keep out of this, you're dead" and "For a dead person you are talking too much." Here, Adams and Meretzky are gleefully rubbing in the fact the player allowed themselves to die.

In the game design literature, this kind of confrontational humor has sometimes been frowned upon. Adams and Rollings (2007), for example, state as a "Commandment" that designers should not taunt the player. They write: "A few designers think it's funny to taunt or insult the player for losing. This is mean-spirited and violates a central principle of player-centric game design – the duty to empathize. The player will feel bad about losing anyway. Don't make it worse" (p.230). This wisdom might well apply in certain contexts, but it also marginalizes other situations in

which this kind of gallows humor is not only appropriate, but necessary. Too focused on games in themselves, the advice overlooks playful meta-games that some players do indeed enjoy.[17]

The takeaway is that humor, especially in a deliberately "abusive" or otherwise dialogic design, serves as a useful tool for lightening the mood and cushioning frustration. Humor frames the user-creator rivalry in a more palatable way, motivating the user to continue the back-and-forth.

Context

Finally – and perhaps most importantly – dialogic designers should pay special attention to the cultural, social, and personal *contexts* around gameplay. For instance, it's no coincidence that *Kaizo Mario* happens to be a mod of one of the best-selling videogames of all time. Because *Super Mario World* is such a touchstone reference in gaming culture, a mod like *Kaizo Mario* is able to play with well-established gaming conventions. In fact, because *Super Mario World* is *so* familiar to many videogame aficionados, *Kaizo Mario* doesn't just rely on a generalized gaming literacy; it also plays off personal and more specific memories of the original game. No surprise, then, that masocore games like *I Wanna Be The Guy* (2007), *I Wanna Be The Boshy* (2010), and *Syoban Action* are all filled with references to specific old Nintendo games.[18]

The critical importance of shared history is made clear by the infamous *Kaizo Mario* trap where the player can lose during the victory animation (described above). For any player, no matter their background, the twist is likely to be quite surprising. But for those of us who grew up with *Super Mario World*, Takemoto's trap takes on a whole additional layer of outrageousness. The assumption that the victory animation constitutes a safe period has been ingrained by sheer force of repetition. Throughout the game, these nuggets of shared gaming culture provide a convenient starting point for player-designer back-and-forth.

Nevertheless, dialogic game design need not only target hardcore videogame aficionados. Game designers can also utilize broader cultural contexts. One of my own games, *Dark Room Sex Game* (2008), offers one possible such strategy. The game, deliberately subverting Nintendo's family-friendly image, is a no-graphics, collaborative sex rhythm game played with wiimotes. Much like Marina Abramović's *Imponderabilia* (described above), *Dark Room Sex Game* plays on cultural taboos that surround sex and eroticism in an attempt to *embarrass* its audience (Wilson and Sicart, 2010). The game works particularly well in a conference setting: two players volunteer to try a new wiimote game, and suddenly they find themselves having virtual gay sex – in front of a crowd, no less. Beyond the simple mechanics of the game system, the "true" challenge is to endure the social awkwardness, thereby persevering over the designers' mischievous dare.

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[17] On this point, Adams and Rollings frame their warning as a kind of design imperative: "The arcade model encourages the game designer to think of her player as an opponent. It suggests that the designer's job is to create obstacles for the player, to make it hard for the player to win the game. This is a profoundly wrongheaded approach to game design" (p.40). Yes, there are certainly cases in which this deliberately adversarial approach to game design is inadvisable. The problem, however, is that such a blanket statement, framed as a generalizable design value, marginalizes other, alternative approaches to making games.

[18] I have had difficulty finding reliable English-language information about the origins of *Syoban Action*, which supposedly debuted in Japan as a freeware game. For a brief description of the game, see RobertAugustdeMeijer. 2008. There is now a cross-platform, open source version of the game, hosted on SourceForge: http://sourceforge.net/projects/opensyobon.

Figure 15 – A group of unsuspecting players try *Dark Room Sex Game* in Visby, Summer 2008.

Admittedly, *Dark Room Sex Game* may not work as well in other settings. For example, I would have reservations about showcasing the game at a conference dedicated to sex and technology. The game would probably seem oddly *conservative* for an audience of people working in the adult entertainment industry. Abramović's work too is deeply dependent on context, as demonstrated by a recent re-staging of *Imponderabilia* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Randy Kennedy, in a *New York Times* feature on the exhibition, observed that the piece (and others like it) has lost some of its punch: "Such visceral, unsettling art used to generate disgust, outrage and the occasional police visit. Yet a day spent watching people watch the show […] shows that it takes quite a bit to shake up most museumgoers these days" (Kennedy, 2010). The lesson here is that the work of dialogic design sometimes resides less in shaping objects and systems themselves, and more in appropriating the right contexts in the right way.[19]

[19] Another relevant precedent from the contemporary art world is Grant Kester's (2004) theory of "dialogical aesthetics." Echoing ideals from participatory design traditions. Kester surveys a variety of artists whose community-based practices take as their starting point the specific needs and requirements of all the stakeholders involved. As Kester sees it, dialogical artworks aren't just made "for" particular groups, they're made *with* those groups. The hope is that artist and community members will be able to leverage their exposed differences in the service of building empathy and identification. To be clear, my own formulation of dialogic creative practice as explored herein is far less "participatory," instead focusing on the felt experience of using a completed design. Nevertheless, this paper draws inspiration from Kester's more general idea that artists might also inspire to be *context* providers, not just "content" providers (p.1).

That said, it is also possible for dialogic designers to provide their own "setup." Takemoto and Kiba's popular *Kaizo Mario* videos stand out as one successful example. More than just documentation, the videos have been carefully edited to convey the drama and humor of Kiba's trials and tribulations. The videos, distilling down the hardships of Kiba's struggle, frequently devolve into tragicomic death montages of failure after failure juxtaposed in rapid succession. For the many of us who first discovered *Kaizo Mario* through these videos, the YouTube culture around the game has primed us to think about it in a certain way. With a flair for the theatrical, Takemoto and Kiba have been able to successfully dress the game in its own evocative narrative.

Agatha Christie's work underscores another promising strategy for creating context. Christie's novels, for those who read multiple, end up comprising a whole ecosystem. Over the course of her oeuvre, Christie developed a coherent style and internal logic that she could subsequently play off of. In short, she was able to use her readers' expectations to her advantage. In the gaming world, this same strategy has worked well for indie designer Jonatan "cactus" Söderström. Famous for his prolific output and off-kilter antagonistic aesthetic, Söderström has self-published numerous small freeware games. Tellingly, one of his most popular titles, *Cactus Arcade* (2008), is actually a collection of 17 of his existing games. The sheer volume of Söderström's output has helped shift the focus from the games themselves to the creative voice behind them. His games are not merely twisted, but twisted *just like the rest of his work.*

Dialogic Game Design in the Mainstream

The goal of nurturing a dialogue between player and designer need not be limited to the more niche domains of hardcore retro games and installation art. Dialogic design, as demonstrated by *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, can also be useful for mainstream commercial products. A number of critically acclaimed commercial games have built a reputation out of deliberately misleading and even outright lying to the player.

One famous example is Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002), a horror-action game for the Nintendo GameCube. The game is primarily remembered for its "sanity meter" mechanic: as the player character encounters more enemies, their sanity meter is depleted and they begin to hallucinate. Some of these hallucinatory effects are non-diegetic, directed at the *player*. For instance, the game will occasionally pretend that it is deleting instead of saving the player's current progress, as if the player had mistakenly selected the wrong option. Far from feeling forced or superfluous, the hallucinations manage to complement the game world's atmosphere, intensifying the horror experience. Moreover, the hallucinations add an engaging meta-game. The designers seem to be daring the player not to fall for their psychological tricks.

More recently, Playdead's *Limbo* (2010), a moody puzzle-platformer game set in an unfriendly macabre world, takes a similarly antagonistic stance towards the player. Much like in *Kaizo Mario*, *Limbo* frequently presents false solutions that trick the player into a deadly trap. Level designer Jeppe Carlsen, in an interview with *Gamasutra* (Sheffield, 2010), explains that the aim was to design a game that the player learns by dying over and over again. He advises puzzle designers to "think of the player as your worst enemy, and then create the most devious puzzle possible." As Carlsen explains it, the team's strategy was to start from that principle of designer-player rivalry, then scale back on the difficulty just enough to make the puzzles palatable.

Figure 16 – One of the secret DK coins in *Donkey Kong Country 2* (1995). (Screenshot via *Wikipedia*).

David Sirlin (2010), a game designer and critic, praises another well-known platformer game, *Donkey Kong Country 2* (1995), for its dialogic qualities. In particular, Sirlin calls attention to the placement of the game's secret "DK coins," one of which is hidden in each level. Only by finding all these coins can players max out the percentage of the game that they have "completed" – a number which is prominently listed next to every save file. Sirlin contrasts these coins with similar hidden collectibles in sprawling open-world games. He argues that the clear rhythm of how they're parceled out – one coin per level – gives the player extra motivation to engage that challenge. Sirlin points out that the coin's oversized graphical representation (golden, spinning, and "tauntingly large") eggs the player on with playful antagonism.[20] Sirlin dwells on one particular coin that is hidden in a bonus room, as a secret within a secret. He recounts:

> This particular secret was very memorable to me because after I failed to find it several times, I put the controller down and simply thought about it where it could possibly be, then realized a certain bonus room on that level had something suspicious about it, and that it must be 'legal' to hide DK coins there after all!

[20] Sirlin points out additional ways in which the game taunts the player: "the character Cranky Kong taunts the player by telling him how he has no hope of finding all the DK coins and bonus rooms. This gives the player a clear idea of his mission: to prove Cranky wrong." Here, we might wonder how much the player identifies the Cranky Kong character with the designers themselves. This observation serves as a good reminder that the line between meta-game (i.e. against the designer) and game itself is a very blurry one.

In *Donkey Kong Country 2*, the levels are designed to guide the player on a certain path. Only by making a conscious effort to deviate from that path will the player be able to find the game's many secrets. As Sirlin puts it, "it's a constant psychological battle against your own assumptions. Every step of the way, the game is trying to fool you." For Sirlin, it is precisely this psychological battle that makes *Donkey Kong Country 2* so dialogic:

> The highest compliment I can give the game is to say that I felt every DK coin was placed by a single intelligence--by one person. As the game progressed, I came to know how he thought and what he'd be likely to do. In essence, the game was felt not like an action game of me versus the computer, but a strategy game of me versus the designer.

Yet despite this battle of wits and willpower, Sirlin points out that the creator-audience rivalry need not be treated as a zero-sum game. Drawing inspiration from mystery novels, he argues that a good writer actually wants their readers to solve the mystery – just not too soon. A game like *Kaizo Mario*, however, takes this rivalry one step farther. Arguably, the designer of such a game wants the bragging rights of fooling the audience into falling for their tricks.

Nevertheless, Sirlin's observation still holds: the dialogic back-and-forth of user versus designer, pitted against one another as worthy competitors, need not be viewed as a zero-sum game. Framed the right way and in the right context, the user's struggle against the designer can, counter-intuitively, speak to a relation more collaborative. In a successfully dialogic design situation, it is the dance *between* the two that ultimately matters more than the outcome. Sometimes, beneath all the antagonism, there lurks a unifying aesthetic of *togetherness*.

Conclusion: When the Designer *Does* Come in the Box

In this paper, I explored what it might mean to employ "dialogue" as a design aesthetic. Thinking about the relation between user, designer, and object, I argued that theoretical frameworks which focus too intently on the object itself risk neglecting how users might relate to the designer(s), imagined or real. Drawing from such precedents as Agatha Christie's mystery novels and Marina Abramović's performance art, I argued that the notion of "rivalry" provides one particularly evocative lens for thinking about the back-and-forth between user and designer. I explained that this back-and-forth might be literal ("strong-form") or more figurative ("weak-form"). Citing examples from both the independent games scene and the mainstream game industry, I identified three key considerations for dialogic design: surprise, humor, and context.

Looking towards the future, I want to end this paper by proposing three key domains in which the notion of dialogic design might prove especially fruitful. First, I'd like to suggest that strong-form dialogic design is an underexplored but increasingly viable strategy for independent game designers. With the proliferation of game jams and the availability of accessible game authoring tools like Game Maker and Unity, game development has become a popular hobby and a form of art practice, not just a profession. As such, it is easier than ever to imagine that indie game developers might design games targeted at specific friends and family members, just as T. Takemoto (supposedly) did with *Kaizo Mario*. This notion of specially tailored games has already attracted the attention of several indie developers. One recent example is *In Which Heather Kelley Begins Her Transformation Into An Aquatic Mammal* (unreleased), a game designed by Ottawa-based collective Dirty Rectangles, specifically for artist Heather Kelley.

Figure 17 – Demonstrating *Dark Room Sex Game* at IndieCade 2008 in Seattle.

Second, thinking again about strong-form dialogic design, it is increasingly plausible that independent game developers might aspire to interact with their players *in person*, in the tradition of performance artists like Marina Abramović. With the emergence and growing popularity of game parties like London's Wild Rumpus and indie arcades like New York City's Babycastles, there are now more opportunities than ever for game artists to exhibit work at public events.[21] Speaking from my own personal experience, it has been especially rewarding to run *Dark Room Sex Game* in public. The personal presence of the designer(s) heightens the feeling that the game is a humorously confrontational dare.[22] This face-to-face interaction happily opens up opportunities for players to get their "revenge." For instance, when exhibiting *Dark Room Sex Game* in public, I'll occasionally stumble on a player who performs the game so enthusiastically that I myself become a little embarrassed – a taste of my own medicine, so to speak.

[21] Wild Rumpus is a London-based collective of indie game developers and aficionados who periodically organize public exhibitions of multiplayer indie games, at venues ranging from bars to game festivals. Babycastles is a group of artists, musicians, and game developers who exhibit independent videogames in a variety of public spaces around New York City. Both groups aim to nurture local game culture.

[22] For an example, see this video of me running the game at a class at New York University: http://vimeo.com/15609198

Third, beyond the domain of just games, the notion of user-designer rivalry can inspire design practice more broadly. Bill Gaver's (2008) vision for a more "ludic" approach to design (as discussed above) reminds us that efficiency and user-friendliness are not the only design values we might embrace. We might also apply the playfulness of gamesmanship to industrial design. Accomplished game designer Keita Takahashi, for instance, imagines a washing detergent that "turn[s] water into jello one time in a thousand" (Takahashi, 2008). The hope is that this kind of adversarial practical joke *qua* design can enliven the everyday, at least when framed the right way. As Takahashi phrases it, playfulness can "fill the empty spaces in a person's heart."

Dialogic design, whether literal or figurative, shifts the attention towards the relationship *between* user and designer. The lesson is that designers need not always efface themselves. Contrary to traditional usability wisdom, sometimes the designer really *does* "come in the box."

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- Chapter 3 -

Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now:

On Self-Effacing Games and Unachievements

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Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now: On Self-Effacing Games and Unachievements

"The rule is not the game. The flow of the game is in contradiction to the achievement. The game is what starts beyond the rule and beyond the striving for the result – beyond the 'it'."

-- Henning Eichberg (2010, p.191)

"… we find it best to play pointless games in which the wellness we are able to share comes not from the excellence of our performance but rather from the excellence of the joke we have perpetrated upon each other, the sublimity of the silliness, the perfection of the ridiculous."

-- Bernie DeKoven (1978, p.99)

Two Introductory Anecdotes

It's the 2010 Game Developers Conference, and we're at the Mezzanine club in downtown San Francisco for the GAMMA IV party. I'm sprawled out on the ground – which is still damp with the residue of spilled cocktails – and I'm being trampled by three strangers as I desperately grasp for my Xbox controller. I am exactly where I want to be.

In this moment I am showcasing my own game, *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (a.k.a. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*) (2010), a digitally-mediated party game in which two to eight players take a number of steps away from the screen and then race to the controllers through physical space. The goal is to press your button (or, in some cases, to defend your button from being pressed by others) in a certain way as specified on the screen. The *B.U.T.T.O.N.* competition here at the GAMMA IV party has gotten so physical precisely because the game goes out of its way to encourage a playful kind of "dirty" tactics. As I lunge for my controller, I'm also hoping to grab some of the other ones. Hoarding your opponents' controllers is, after all, an effective form of defense.

Figure 1 – The author, trampled while playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* at GAMMA IV.

There does seem to be a line between "good" and "bad" unfair tactics, though it's a very fuzzy one. This night, we and most of our players have agreed – tacitly or explicitly – that the projector is off-limits. When one player tries turning it off, a number of us concur that the resulting game isn't so much fun. These kinds of negotiations crop up constantly. My co-developer Lawrence, for example, takes some dubiously small steps away from the screen. The rest of us end up dragging him back to the "proper" starting position. The trick is to be bold and creative in how you bend the rules. Another one of my co-developers, Lau, starts taking some additional steps backwards in order to build up a running start during the countdown. He is making a fool of himself, but in a way that is both amusing and clever.

These improvisations, and the negotiations around them, are all fueled by the ambiguity of what is and isn't allowed. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* seems to revel in this ambiguity, actively goading its players to out-hoodwink one another. And even if the rules were clear, the game wouldn't be able to enforce them. We know that only we ourselves, the human players, are able to referee what happens in front of the screen, out in the physical world. This glaring absence of total systemization – all the more apparent because it is situated against the familiar frame of screen-based console gaming – opens up a space for a playful subversiveness. It is the magic ingredient that makes the game, so simplistic and so stupid on the face of it, worth playing.

But this first anecdote tells only part of the story. Here's a second anecdote:

It is the 2010 Nordic Game Conference, and we are at a club in Malmö, Sweden for the conference party. With some apprehension I am watching my friend Nicklas play *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Most people at the club are very drunk, and Nicklas' three opponents prove no exception. Nicklas is an experienced player, but his slender build and mild-mannered personality make him an awkward match-up for three belligerent drunks. The round begins, and one of the drunks gets a little *too* excited, tackling poor Nicklas down to the floor. Somehow, this is no longer the same game that Nicklas remembers playing with our own group of less aggressive friends.

In the company of friends or like-minded strangers, the punk rock, design-it-yourself spirit of the game can be liberating. But played carelessly – however we even define that – the game can quickly turn sour. Such are the opportunities and pitfalls of so physical and open-ended a game system, so obviously contingent on the particular players and the particular setting. Yet it's precisely because the game can go so wrong that it's so rewarding when the players manage to keep it going "right." Its contingent nature might well be the main attraction.

I'd like to argue that these kinds of messy, hybrid analog-digital game forms deserve our attention. From a design perspective, it can be productively evocative to conceptualize these kinds of silly party games not as "systems," but rather as *festive contexts* – as excuses to laugh and horse around with friends. Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* foreground the material and social circumstances around the game, in an attempt to call attention to the people playing. These kinds of games can help frame multiplayer gaming as the pursuit of festivity, achieved *together*.

Outline & Method

In this article, I use *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a case study to raise some conjectures about the possibilities of digitally-mediated play and games. Reflecting back on my experiences designing the game and showcasing it to the public, I believe that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and other games like it point to an alternative perspective on the design of digital games – a perspective which will help illuminate certain under-explored design strategies. My argument is that intentionally "broken" or otherwise

incomplete game systems can help support a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play. From a design perspective, the key to making these kinds of broken games work is to frame them in the right way. In this view, the practice of game design becomes less about crafting systems, and more about mood setting and instilling into the players the appropriate "spirit."

First, in order to better articulate my team's design aims, I provide a more detailed description of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and how the game works. Second, I situate the game against other recent efforts that try to pull digital gaming out into the material world. In particular, I examine the game in terms of Bart Simon's (2009) notion of "gestural excess." Third, I propose two terms – "unachievements" and "self-effacing games" – which help articulate the specific qualities that distinguish *B.U.T.T.O.N.* from more traditional digital games. Finally, I position the game in terms of Henning Eichberg's (2010) concept of the "impossible game" and Bernie DeKoven's (1978) notion of the "Well-Played game." In drawing our attention not just to players, but also to the relationships between them, Eichberg and DeKoven offer us provocative clues as to what it might mean to design for *togetherness*.

Throughout the article, I deliberately focus on one particular example in order to explore in depth the issues it raises. That said, my interest here is not ultimately the game itself, but rather the broader design strategy that underlies it. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* may not be the best or most "successful" example of self-effacing game design, but it's an example I'm uniquely qualified to discuss. This article is motivated by a belief that there is something useful to be gleamed from someone who has "been there" throughout the entire development process and who is able to articulate those experiences, post-facto, within a specific set of academic discourses.[1]

Furthermore, I'd like to stress that the game should not be viewed as an "experiment" or a research prototype.[2] Developed as a project with the Copenhagen Game Collective, *B.U.T.T.O.N.*

[1] Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne (1999), discussing three particular PhD projects from the Royal College of Art, argue that design researchers can embrace creative practice as a productive methodological strategy. They point out that "there is a kind of tacit knowledge creative professionals possess which cannot be separated from their perception, judgment, and skill" (p.16). Though I agree that a designer's perspective offers important insights that would otherwise be unattainable, my own views on the relationship between practice and research differ in some key ways from those elaborated by Dunne. In *Hertzian Tales* (2005), Dunne remarks that the conceptual designs he presents "are not necessarily illustrations of the ideas discussed in earlier chapters, nor are the earlier chapters an explanation of these proposals. *They evolved simultaneously and are part of the same design process*" (p. xviii, emphasis mine). As I explain below, I do not view my practice and my research as part of the same process or context.

[2] In the design research literature, there is strong precedent for incorporating one's own creative practice into a research project (e.g. Dunne, 2005; Gaver, 2008). However, in methodological discussions about how design practice relates to research, it is often emphasized that the practitioner does so with a clear "intent" to produce knowledge (Fallman, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2007). Even Fallman's notion of a looser "design exploration" speaks to creative processes "driven by ideals or theory" (p. 8). The fact is that the design of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was driven neither by a particular research question nor by any particular ideal. As I explain below, it was driven by its social context and by a desire to score free GDC passes. Only months after the initial design did I realize, post-facto, how relevant the game was to my research interests. That said, I don't mean to suggest that my practice and my research are somehow unrelated. I admit that my university work must, at some level, affect my practice – after all, I only have one brain. As Christopher Frayling (1993) argues, research does indeed act as an important source of "nourishment" for creative practice. My point is simply that the notion of "research" evokes a certain kind of contextual frame that cannot satisfactorily be applied to *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Thus, I eschew the term "method" in order to call attention to the marked difference between contexts.

was not designed in an academic context.[3] It is the product of a particular social milieu and reflects a particular set of agendas.[4] I do not consider my design work as a "method," because for me the term carries with it some unwelcome institutional baggage. When I'm "in the moment" of design, it's crucial that my practice not be instrumentalized towards a context external to the collective. As such, I view the "research" component of my work as the theoretical reflection contained in this article – a kind of literature-grounded creator's statement, written in a university context. My aim here is to provide an evocative conceptual framework that will inspire us to think about digital game design in a different way.

Playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*

As described in the introduction, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is a rather simple game – at least at first glance. The gist is that two to eight players race to their controllers, through physical space.

To start a round of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, each player presses their designated button.[5] This assigns the player a silly-looking avatar, used to provide some graphical indication of when that player's button is pressed and when that player wins or loses. Throughout the round, players follow a series of instructions that appear on the screen. First, they're instructed to put their controllers down. Second, they're ordered to take some specified number of steps backwards, away from their controllers. Third, they're given some kind of command, such as a specific task (e.g. "Do five pushups"), a position from which to start the round ("Lie on the floor"), or a gameplay constraint (e.g. "Slow-mo round!"). Finally, after a short countdown, a randomly chosen win or lose condition is displayed (e.g. "First player to push their button 15 times wins") and players rush towards the controllers. Ideally, a playful kind of chaos ensues. After a certain window of time, the round ends and the results are displayed. Players can then begin another round.

[3] *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was originally designed in January 2010 as an entry to the GAMMA IV competition. The challenge was to design a game played with only one button. We stumbled upon the idea for the game somewhat unexpectedly, while drinking beers at an impromptu birthday party. In part, the brainstorming was an end in itself; we enjoyed making each other laugh through absurd design proposals. But the brainstorming was also fueled by a desire to score free GDC passes – the reward for making the GAMMA IV showcase. Given the sheer volume of competing submissions, we knew we'd have to distinguish our game from the other entries. To this end, we realized that we could subvert the one-button constraint by encouraging players to interact with each other in the material world. After realizing the potential of this concept, we began prototyping in earnest later that month. Only months later did I realize, post-facto, how relevant the game was to my research interests.

[4] Following the game's debut at GDC 2010, we showcased further iterations at several other public venues, including Roskilde Festival 2010, E3 2010, Indie Games Arcade at the 2010 Eurogamer Expo, Babycastles, and IndieCade 2010. In December 2010, we publicly released the game on Xbox Live Indie.

[5] Because *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is a one-button game, multiple players are able to share one controller. In the current version of the game, there are two play modes: a standard mode which supports 2-4 players, and Epic Brawl, a mode which supports 5-8 players. In the 2-4 player mode, players can choose to share one controller (one button is assigned to each player) or to assign different controllers to each individual player. In the 5-8 player Epic Brawl mode, the players choose between sharing two controllers (up to four players per controller) or four controllers (up to two players per controller). In the PC version, players can also choose to play both modes by keyboard (each player is assigned their own key).

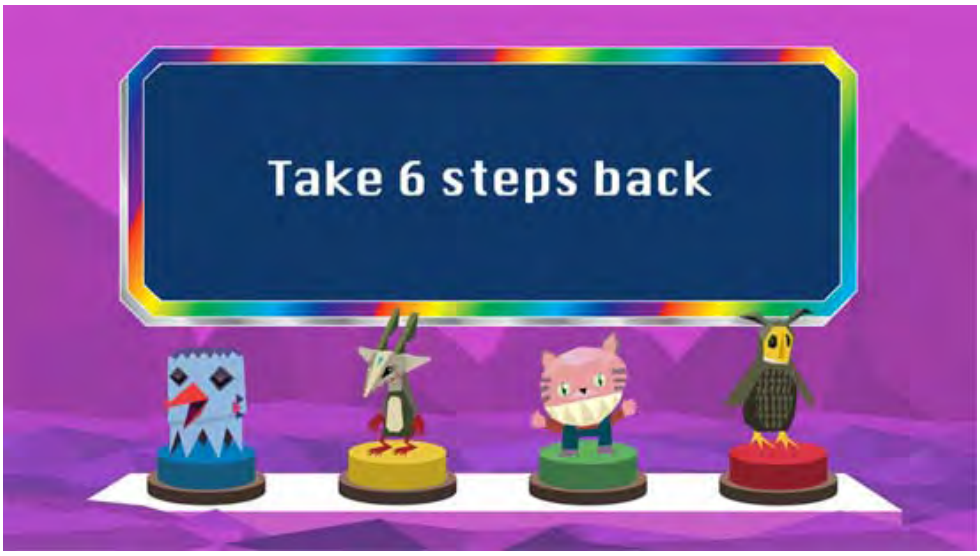

Figure 2 – In most rounds, the game instructs the players to take some variable number of steps away from their controllers.

The game's defining characteristic is the "incompleteness" of its underlying system, in the sense that it's so obviously up to the players themselves to interpret and enforce the rules. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is not a game played with motion control technology. The computer has no way of refereeing whether you took exactly six steps back, or if you did indeed spin around five times. That the players are collectively responsible for policing themselves only serves to exacerbate the ambiguity of the rules. How is a "step" measured? How slow do you need to be during the slow-mo round? These physical world actions are not so easy to systematize ad hoc.

Beyond the poorly elaborated instructions telling the players what they should do, the game has very little to say on the issue of what the players should *not* do. Admittedly, this is true of almost all digital games, which rarely specify what players can or cannot do in the physical space of the living room. The difference here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in requiring players to step away from and then rush to the controllers, sets a clear precedent for unsupervised physical play. In a party setting, the game can become quite physical as players jostle for position or wrestle for the controllers.

One of the few aspects of the game that is actually codified into computer logic is the win/lose conditions. Nevertheless, in designing the game we have tried to introduce some confusion wherever possible. Inspired by various folk games which playfully ostracize one player from the social group (Eichberg, 2010; Møller, 1990, 2010), we have designed explicit *lose* conditions (e.g. "Last player whose button is pressed loses") in an attempt to complicate the supposed binary of winning and losing.[6] If a player wins, their avatar does a dance. If they lose, their avatar is replaced by a tombstone. If they neither win nor lose, their avatar starts crying. The players must

[6] Møller, writing from a Danish perspective, discusses *syndebuklege*, which translates as "scapegoat games." Typically, these kinds of games feature one player who is pitted against the larger social group, as a kind of outcast. For example, in the common playground game of run-and-catch (also known as "tag," or in Danish, *tagfat*), the player who acts as the chaser is declared "It." Often, these games continue without clear winners or a defined endpoint. In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, however, we were inspired by a somewhat different take on scapegoating. In particular, we were influenced by Danish drinking games that declare one clear *loser*. For example, in Denmark, the bluffing game of Liar's Dice is typically played to isolate one loser who then buys a round of drinks for the table.

decide themselves how to valorize the three outcomes in relation to one another.[7] Is it more satisfying to win, or to make someone else lose? Is winning as desirable as losing is undesirable?[8] In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as one of the in-game messages reminds, "not winning is *not* the same as losing!"

B.U.T.T.O.N. does more than just open a space for player improvisation and negotiation. The game actively embraces its ambiguities, encouraging players to bend, break, and extend the rules.[9] "Unfair tactics" is the name of the game, both figuratively and literally. One in-game message, for example, reminds us that "it's totally OK to push other players' buttons." This same message is also hinted by the game mechanics themselves. The lose condition which reads "Any player whose button is pressed loses" would hardly make sense if players restricted themselves to using only their own assigned buttons. Other commands, such as "Close your eyes" and "Turn around," all but force the players to cheat; though the computer playfully scolds "Dude, no cheating!" the players have little choice but to peek if they want to find out when the race begins.[10]

In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, we hoped to encourage the kinds of "house rules" and improvised modifications that often arise around non-digital games like board games and playground games – and not just encourage those house rules, but also get players to revel in and savor them, in a very conscious way. The idea here is that the meta-game – the negotiation around the game – can be just as engaging as the game itself, at least when framed in the proper way.

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[7] A game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* strives to undermine the definition of "game" as proposed by theorists like Jesper Juul (2005). In particular, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* challenges Juul's stipulations that a game provides "quantifiable" and clearly "valorized" outcomes. Juul writes: "Since playing a game where the participants disagree about the outcome is rather problematic, the specification of the outcome develops like the rules of a game, towards becoming unambiguous" (p.39). Even if this observation holds true for many, if not most games, we should be careful not to embrace these definitions as generalized design wisdom. The design of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* was informed by our concerns that precise definitions like Juul's embody a kind of inherent conservatism, reifying certain conventions at the expense of alternative possibilities.

[8] In the current version of the game, the outcome valorization has become less ambiguous. Players are now rewarded with a medal if they win, displayed next to their avatar. Each player can accumulate up to three medals, and loses all their medals if they ever lose a round. This feature, which serves as a visual indication of win streaks, was added to give some sense of continuity over multiple rounds. In retrospect, however, I would argue that the medals make the outcome valorization *too* unambiguous. In the future, we would like to replace the medals with special hats (e.g. a crown, a dunce cap) given to winning and losing characters in various situations. Hats would still provide visual emphasis for wins and losses, without so clearly quantifying who has won the "most." More importantly, hats would be given to both winners *and* losers. Again, our design goal is to make it unclear whether winning is preferable to making other players lose.

[9] The idea that ambiguity can serve as a valuable resource for design has famously been explored by Gaver et al. (2003). Writing from a design research perspective, Gaver et al. emphasize the ways in which ambiguity can raise questions and interrogate values. They argue that ambiguity can "compel people to join in the work of making sense of a system and its context" (p. 237). In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, however, we employed ambiguity for somewhat different reasons. Beyond just opening up the game to interpretation, we wanted to enlist our players as active co-designers. Our goal was not to provoke a heady kind of reflection, but rather to facilitate a transgressive kind of fun. We are less interested in how ambiguity affects the relationship linking user and object than we are in how it affects the relationships between different users.

[10] To this end, we have deliberately muted the "Go!" sound in these situations in order to reward cheaters.

Figure 3 – "Any player whose button is pressed loses" – this condition makes more sense when the players realize that they can press their *opponents'* buttons to make them lose.

Situating *B.U.T.T.O.N.*

B.U.T.T.O.N., of course, does not represent some entirely unprecedented set of design ideas. In the academic world, for example, an increasing number of HCI and ubiquitous computing researchers have turned their attention toward digitally meditated games that encourage both physical activity and social play. These efforts, encompassing a variety of related subgenres like augmented-reality games, location-aware games, and exertion games, are often grouped together under the banner of "pervasive gaming," "an emerging genre in which traditional, real-world games are augmented with computing functionality, or, depending on the perspective, purely virtual computer entertainment is brought back to the real world" (Magerkurth et al, 2005, p.1).

In a recent theme issue of *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, a variety of researchers explore how computer technology can be used in designing for social interaction through physical play (Bekker et al., 2010a). Soute et al. (2010) advance the idea of "Head Up Games" – games that free their players from having to look down at screens, be they television screens or the smaller screens of handheld devices. In one of their outdoor games, *Save the Safe*, players wear a special belt that determines when an attacking player gets close enough to a defending player to steal a virtual "key." Likewise, Bekker et al. (2010b) design and evaluate interactive play objects that use sensors and multimodal feedback to "stimulate social interaction between children through physical play" (p.385). Echoing our own intentions in designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, both Soute et al. and Bekker et al. emphasize the value of games that are open-ended enough to support player adaptation of the rules. Yet despite all these parallels, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* cannot adequately be understood from a pervasive computing perspective. As I argue later, the game embodies a very different, more skeptical attitude towards the role of technology in game design.

Attitudinally, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is better positioned in relation to a recent wave of physical indie games. Terry Cavanagh's *Sumouse* (2010), for instance, is a simple game in which two players share the same mouse and compete to guide the cursor in opposite directions. The contest is all but guaranteed to become a physical one. In a similar fashion, Anna Anthropy's *Chicanery* (2009) tasks each of its players with holding down one specific key on the keyboard. The winner

is the player who manages to hold down their key the longest.[11] *Chicanery* is a game that only "makes sense" once players realize that the game is primarily a physical one. Like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the game goes out of its way to signal the absence of total systemization. Before each round, *Chicanery* reminds us: "the game doesn't care what you do to make the other players let go of their keys!" *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, then, can be viewed as part of a growing movement of indie developers interested in exploring the social and material circumstances around the computer.

The mainstream game industry too has taken a keen interest in the role of physicality in digital gaming. Over the last decade, the overwhelming success of games like *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, 2006), *Dance Dance Revolution*, and *Guitar Hero* has fundamentally changed the landscape of the console games market. With the recent releases of Sony's PlayStation Move and Microsoft's Kinect, all three major console manufacturers seem to be betting on a future in which consumers are increasingly interested in the action "out in the living room," not just the action on the screen. Accordingly, the advertisements for these games typically focus less on the in-game visuals and more on the physical reality of players moving in space and interacting with one another. Bart Simon (2009), riffing on the term "eye candy," situates these ads as "body candy" – "a kind of fascination with what we can do with our bodies in the physical space in front of the screen." "The focus," Simon continues, "is not on the game but on the players, or more suggestively perhaps, the focus is on the players as the game" (p.3).

Perhaps the closest such commercial analog to *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is Nintendo's *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* (Intelligent Systems, 2006).[12] *Smooth Moves* features a collection of zany "micro-games" that only last a couple of seconds. In each micro-game, one player uses their wiimote to adopt a silly pose, such as "The Elephant" or "The Samurai." From that pose, the player attempts to complete a simple little task, such as tracing a shape or slicing a virtual piece of wood. None of these micro-games would work very well individually. Rather, they work together in series, synergistically. Because *Smooth Moves* fires off these micro-games at such a manic pace, it's difficult to get too emotionally invested in any one challenge. The focus is shifted away from the game-delineated reward system of winning and losing, towards the human beings performing and willfully making fools of themselves.

Still, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* somehow feels less systematized than most Wii titles. One key difference is that gestural games like *Smooth Moves* evaluate the players' moment-to-moment physical movements in a very explicit way. The fun of playing a game like *Smooth Moves* or *Wii Sports* stems at least in part from the challenge of learning to how to satisfy a complex technological system with the right accelerometer and optical sensor input. In *Wii Sports* Tennis, for example, there is a certain skill to aiming the ball in the right direction, or in serving it at top speed. It is precisely because these skills require non-trivial effort to learn that mastering them can feel rewarding.

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[11] It is also possible for everybody to lose a game of *Chicanery* if the last remaining players release their keys near-simultaneously.

[12] More recent is Nintendo's *Wii Party* (2010), which features a number of quirky mini-games that take an approach very similar to that of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* Particularly relevant to this article is the Animal Tracker mini-game, in which players set their wiimotes down on the table in front of them. Each round, the game plays different animal sounds out of the wiimotes' built-in speaker. The goal is to grab the one wiimote playing the sound specified at the beginning of the round. Though the game stops short of actively encouraging the same kind of shenanigans that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* does, the scramble to the wiimotes is all but guaranteed to become a physical one. *Gamespot* reviewer Austin Light (2010) remarks that mini-games like Animal Tracker "seem to step beyond the TV screen" – that "they're more about having fun *with a group of people*" (emphasis mine).

In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, by contrast, the majority of the central gameplay actions – stepping away from the screen, jostling for position, and rushing to the controllers – remain entirely unmonitored by the computer. It's not the technological system that motivates the players to move around and follow the directions, but rather the *play community* (DeKoven, 1978) – the presence of competitors and spectators, and the general agreement, tacit or explicit, that "yes, we've agreed to play this silly game, and we're going to try our best to have fun with it and each other." Indeed, it's difficult to imagine anyone ever playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a single-player game. The system underlying the game amounts to little more than a glorified button-press detector.

Figure 4 – Players at IndieCade 2010, responding to the command "Play dead."

Yet in another view, gestural games and open-ended physical games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* may actually share more parallels than this comparison admits. As Simon (2009) argues, gestural gameplay isn't just play with fancy motion detection technology – it is also play *against* and *around* that technology. If playing *Wii Sports* Tennis, for instance, could be reduced to the instrumental pursuit of optimizing one's actions within a certain technological system, there would hardly be any reason to move the wiimote much. As players quickly learn, a small efficient flick of the wrist generates enough acceleration to hit the ball well. Yet as Simon points out, many players continue to play *Wii Sports* Tennis with exaggerated, full-armed swings, even when they understand that the system "neither demands nor acknowledges" these more mimetic movements (p.12).

Gestural gameplay, in this view, is not just the challenge of learning a technological system, but also an excuse to engage in a type of bodily play that is as theatrically performative as it is unnecessary. As Simon sees it, these "gestural excesses" speak to an intrinsic reward – an end in itself, beyond any rewards as framed by the game system. He writes: "There is a kind of group-induced karaoke effect where the act of playing, singing or dancing becomes a performance for others that are as important as, or more important than, the gameplay as defined by the software" (p.13).

Gestural excessiveness, as a showy form of inefficient gameplay, represents a refutation of hardcore instrumental play. As Simon argues, "It is precisely because the gesture of the overhead smash is not necessary given the system of control that it becomes meaningful" (p.13). Paradoxically, the intrinsic rewards of gestural excessiveness are framed against the extrinsic

win/loss rewards as defined by the system. Performative and instrumental styles of play are inextricably linked, in a kind of juxtapositional relationship.

Not all gestural games, however, support this kind of excessive bodily play to the same degree. Simon, comparing the different gameplay modes of Rockstar's *Table Tennis* (2007), observes that the "increased complication and fast pace" of the game's advanced mode "arguably leaves less room for gestural excess as players' gestures become increasingly enveloped by control imperative of the advanced simulation" (p.13). In other words, the more challenging and complex the game, the more the player must perform to the system, on the system's own terms. On the other side of the spectrum, a simple game like *Wii Sports* Tennis can become, as Simon puts it, "deathly boring" (p.13) without the players' own intrinsically motivated embellishments.

B.U.T.T.O.N. takes this latter, less-is-more approach to system design and runs with it ad absurdum, to a point at which the excess all but eclipses the actions acknowledged by the system. Actually, the very notion of "excess" no longer even seems to apply. The game consists of little else *besides* the players' embellishments. Like *Wii Sports* Tennis, it would be deathly boring without them. The difference is that in *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, these kinds of embellishments frequently double as good strategy. A well-timed shove or a gutsy dive isn't just showy – it can make all the difference between success and failure. In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the line between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, between performative and instrumental, is very blurry indeed.

Achievements, Anti-Achievements, Unachievements

Perhaps it would be more accurate to classify *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as a kind of contemporary playground game, instead of as a videogame. Anthropological studies of children's playground games have demonstrated such games to be fertile sources of performativity and improvised rule modifications (Hughes, 1983, 1995). Such a genealogy seems especially relevant given that our design thinking was influenced by various New Games and folk game traditions (DeKoven, 1978; Eichberg, 2010; Fluegelman, 1976). Yet even these classifications don't feel quite right.

The following hypothetical design may help articulate why not: Imagine an entirely non-digital version of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in which the computer system is replaced by a human moderator who announces the various commands and win conditions, and who assesses when the various buttons are pressed. I'd like to argue that this non-digital adaptation, though structurally similar to the original game, would likely nurture a very different player experience.

This discrepancy is largely a matter of differing expectations. When we play a game refereed by a human being, we don't expect the rule system to enforce itself. We ourselves enact the game logic as explained by the rules, and we entrust ourselves or the referee to supervise, however fallibly or inconsistently. By contrast, when we play a console game, we typically expect the computer to carry out the rules for us, or at least the core rules around which the game is designed. When such a system so egregiously fails to enforce the very rules it decrees, it gives a distinct impression of brokenness or incompleteness, as if the system were somehow defaulting on its end of the bargain. We, the players, are forced to pick up the computer's slack, collectively.

In short, what ultimately distinguishes *B.U.T.T.O.N.* from its hypothetical non-digital adaptation – and from other more "traditional" games, both digital and non-digital – is the way it manipulates context to deliberately toy with player expectations. The very obvious gaps, between what the system tells us to do and what it actually processes, set the tone for a kind of generalized mischief. If even the system doesn't take the game so seriously, why should we?

Figure 5 – A typical pre-race command. The game isn't actually able to enforce any of these commands.

Here we have identified the central tension that defines the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* experience: the system gives us explicit orders, but isn't even able to validate whether or not we follow them. These gaps, embraced as a purposeful design strategy, can productively be utilized as a kind of "unachievement." Whereas achievements try to motivate players to pursue specific rewards as delineated by the game system, unachievements try to motivate players to hijack, modify, or otherwise subvert these kinds of extrinsic rewards. Unachievements signal to the players that they shouldn't take the game-specified goals too seriously – that they, the players, should instead confront the game on their own terms.

Achievements, in contrast to the extrinsic goals of the core game (e.g. score more points than the other team), often systematize eccentric or extreme actions that may otherwise have been intrinsically motivated, e.g. "Trick an opposing Medic into healing you" (Valve, 2007). In this sense, achievements and unachievements are diametric opposites. Whereas achievements often monitor actions that players are *not* strictly required to do to win the game, unachievements self-consciously *fail* to monitor actions that players *are* (supposedly) required to do.

The notion of the "unachievement" should be distinguished from that of the "anti-achievement." In gaming culture, the term "anti-achievement" has been used to connote a specific type of achievement that is humorously orthogonal to the stated goal of the game. For example, in one thread on an online *World of Warcraft* forum (Shellar, 2008), fans of the game brainstorm hypothetical anti-achievements such as "Staying Down," earned by players who "Fall from a height of less than 20 yards and die." Anti-achievements poke fun not only at the game, but also at the player. In *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09* (EA Tiburon, 2008), the "Afraid of the Dark" achievement playfully mocks those players who "get the ball within a few inches of the hole without sinking it," rewarding them with a paltry ten Xbox achievement points.

What anti-achievements do is take the theatrical or the subversive – the perfectly bad shot, the irreverent antic, the silly joke – and codify them into a system of clearly delineated extrinsic rewards. Anti-achievements, like achievements more generally, instrumentalize performance, thereby allowing the game system to subsume portions of the meta-game. Anti-achievements simply make this instrumentalization all the more apparent.

Unachievements, by contrast, strive to do the opposite. They open up a space where instrumental gameplay can readily be infused with double meanings and intrinsic motivations. For instance, in a round of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, when I tickle my opponent in an attempt to make them drop their controller, I am not just playing strategically. I am also performing a showy, outrageous action to the crowd, to my opponent, and to myself.

To be clear, the unachievement in this example is not my act of tickling, but rather the systemic gap that facilitated the action. My decision to tickle my opponent is egged on by a game that pretends to "run the show," even though it can't possibly referee the very kind of physical play it encourages. As such, unachievements can only be defined negatively, as conspicuous *absences* of systemization. They should be viewed as provocative *circumstances*, not clear directives. After all, intrinsic rewards, by definition, cannot be prescribed by the game. They must originate from the player. The best a game can do is set its players off with a nod and a wink, then lead by example. In the case of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the hope is that its irreverence will be contagious.

Steve Jackson's famous tabletop game, *Illuminati* (1987), provides a useful illustration of why unachievements can only be formulated indirectly. The *Illuminati* rulebook proposes a humorous variation on the game in which players are permitted to cheat. However, the rulebook also qualifies this rule with a list of clear exceptions, such as "You may not cheat on the amount of money drawn from the bank during setup or the income phase" and "Anyone caught in the act must undo that cheat" (p.9). As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) observe in their analysis of the game, "Cheating in *Illuminati* does not remove all the rules and boundaries from the game: it serves to re-draw them" (p.279). Sanctioned by the official ruleset, these "cheats" become a kind of game-approved strategy. The players are still playing a game provided to them by someone else, not carving out a space for their own game.[13]

Salen and Zimmerman write that "sanctioned cheating can be an innovative way to enrich a game design," but warn that "it must be done with great care" (p.279). They argue that, in *Illuminati*, this care manifests itself in a "careful design" which allows "only those forms of cheating that leave the game intact, playable, meaningful" (p.279). Tellingly, this phrasing locates "meaning" as a quality of the system – of its intactness. The implied design strategy here is one in which the designers use their experience and expertise to filter out "bad" ways of playing.

An alternative strategy is to build a context in which players feel like they are *supposed* to change the game, together. A game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is so broken that it arguably was never very "meaningful" or "intact" in the first place anyway. What it does is try to convince its players that any meaning ultimately resides in *themselves*, not in the system. The game goads us to bend the rules, but in contrast to *Illuminati*, it doesn't set such explicit boundaries. It leaves more (even if not all) of the negotiation work up to the players. In developing the game, our aim was not to make a readily consumable game system, but rather to deputize the players to interpret, enforce, and even modify the rules we prescribe. In other words, the bulk of our design work resided not in engineering the system of rules, but rather in successfully rallying the players to approach the game with sufficient silliness and self-irony.

My claim is that unachievements foreground the game around the game – the social interchange between players. In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, our hope was that the rounds would be too short and the rules too contentious for players to get so invested in winning and losing. It's not that

[13] Like *Illuminati*, a number of other well-known tabletop games try to sanction cheating with well-specified rules. Examples include *Cosmic Encounter* (Eberle et al., 2008) and *Crunch* (Sheerin & Tompkins, 2009). Cheating, as delineated in all of these games, becomes a kind of gameplay flavor, rather than full-fledged, self-motivated transgression.

B.U.T.T.O.N. isn't played competitively; the lure of winning (or of making others lose) is what occasions the game. Rather, it's that this competitive play gravitates towards the self-ironic, tempered by an awareness that the real stakes exist at the level of the meta-game. The "true" competition, if "competition" is even the right word here, is to see who can make the funniest cheat or the cleverest improvisation. In short, unachievements encourage theatrical performance of instrumentality, as opposed to the instrumentalization of performance. Unachievements invite the meta-game to intrude upon the game system.

Self-Effacing Games

Admittedly, my claim that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is somehow more "incomplete" than other games is a tricky distinction to draw. "House rules" are already part and parcel of digital gaming culture (Jakobsson, 2007), and almost any game can (and will) be appropriated by players to improvise strange new games and challenges not envisioned by the original designers (Lowood, 2005; Pearce, 2009; Sotamaa, 2006). More generally, it is certainly true that *any* game can devolve into *B.U.T.T.O.N.*-styled shenanigans. There isn't any reason, for example, why I couldn't physically tackle my opponents while playing a game of, say, *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* (Capcom, 1996), if we deemed that a fun way to play.

As Mikael Jakobsson (2007) observes in his study of a Swedish console game club, even a seemingly "traditional" game like *Super Smash Bros. Melee* foments contentious debates about how the game should be regulated and played. Jakobsson is right when he argues that: "Even at the most fundamental level, rules are influenced by, and affect, the social and cultural aspects of the gaming context" (p.392). Mia Consalvo (2007), in her book on cheating in videogames, points out that gameplay is always subject to "soft rules" – ethical judgments and social customs that shape how the coded game rules are interpreted and appropriated. For instance, in the world of massively multiplayer online games, it remains a controversial issue as to whether it qualifies as "cheating" to use macros and other tools that automate certain aspects of gameplay. Even when game makers deem this kind of play illegal, some players continue to engage in and defend the practice, arguing that automation provides "a way to fast-forward through the undesirable elements of gameplay" (Consalvo, 2007, p.122). Rule negotiation is, as T.L. Taylor (2009) puts it, a "consistent feature" of computer gaming. Total systemization is a myth; it is impossible.

Still, a game like *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* certainly doesn't *invite* us to engage in physical play. Tackling my opponents, if we hadn't already somehow sanctioned that type of play, would likely be taken as a "cheap" or unreasonable action, a violation of what my opponents had implicitly consented to by agreeing to play the game. It just isn't the general convention, when playing an arcade puzzle game, for the competition to spill so messily out into the material world.

What distinguishes *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, then, is that it is actively *self-effacing*.[14] The game *does* invite physical and subversive play, hinting to and even telling the players that the terms of the game are

[14] Bill Gaver, in his discussion of "ludic design" practice, also uses this same term "self-effacing" in relation to some of his design projects (p.174). By "self-effacing," Gaver is alluding to a kind of ambiguity and strangeness of purpose geared towards making designed objects more open-ended and personal – designs that "encourage us to play – seriously – with experiences, ideas and other people" (p.173). Much like the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* team, Gaver aims to facilitate a "self-motivated" form of play beyond the purely instrumental. However, though he mentions play with both ideas and with other people, Gaver ends up giving more attention to the former category – self-effacing designs that get people to play with objects and ideas via consideration, interpretation, and personalization. By contrast, my own interests lie primarily in the latter category – self-effacing designs that get people to play with and think about *each other*.

up for debate. Thus, it's not just that the rules are ambiguous; it's that the game *signals an acute self-awareness of this ambiguity*. The game makes it clear that players are consenting to something different than when agreeing to play a more traditional digital game. It's then up to the players to negotiate what, exactly, they've consented to.

Figure 6 – The game questions itself in an attempt to foreground the social context that surrounds the game rules.

Of course, the *B.U.T.T.O.N.* experience is not a fully malleable one. No matter what the players improvise, the gameplay will always revolve around (or will at least be haunted by) pressing buttons as specified by the game logic. The game is more self-effacing than it is self-destroying. The trick is to design a system contentious enough that players feel compelled to hijack it, but not so contentious that players immediately abandon the game. With this balance in mind, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* provides an accessible hook to kickstart the game (i.e. a race to the controllers), then signals some self-awareness of its contentiousness so that players feel they're licensed to reshape the rules. The players need to feel like they're in on the joke, so to speak.

So, yes, the material and social circumstances behind gameplay – from the players' bodies to the negotiations that happen around the rules – play a key role in shaping *any* gameplay experience, even the experience of a very traditional computer game. The difference here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* gleefully smears these considerations in the players' faces, giving players an occasion to consciously celebrate these oft-neglected facets of console gameplay.

This self-effacement also explains why *B.U.T.T.O.N.* cannot be adequately described as a so-called "augmented-reality" game. Arguably, the pervasive computing research agenda is centrally motivated by the belief that technology can indeed "improve" traditional gameplay. Bekker et al. (2010b), for example, examine "how (outdoor) physical play can be *enriched* in a way that appeals to children, thus creating attractive play alternatives to computers and television" (p.385, emphasis mine). Soute et al. (2010) do recognize that "it is not necessary (or even feasible) to capture all rules in technology," but are nevertheless primarily interested in designing new types of digitally mediated games "that are not playable without the introduction of technology" (p.443). By "merging" traditional and digital play, Soute et al. hope to "combine the best of both worlds" (p.435). Their attitude towards technology is unmistakably optimistic.

In creating *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, we approached this confluence of gameplay and technology from the opposite direction. Rather than try to "enrich" or "augment" traditional physical games with

computer technology, we took as our starting point the familiar frame of the console game, then tried to *disenchant* or *un-augment* that frame. This distinction is largely a matter of attitude. Instead of exploring how technology can be used to "improve" gameplay, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* questions whether games even need all that much "technology" in the first place. The answer, of course, is complicated. Though *B.U.T.T.O.N.* strives to transcend the limitations of computer-enforced rules, the game also enjoys the multimedia capabilities of its supporting technology. This tension notwithstanding, the game at least raises the question. Self-effacing games and the people who design them adopt a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards technology, exchanging optimism for skepticism, irony, and absurdity.

Impossible Games and Festivity

As design strategies, unachievements and self-effacement do more than just encourage players to bend the game to their own, intrinsic motivations. More importantly, they ask players to do this bending *collectively*. A purposefully "broken" multi-player game like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* shifts the focus not only towards the players, but also towards the relationships between them. In goading people to negotiate with and perform to one another, the game challenges its players to forge a shared sense of *togetherness*. In this regard, self-effacing games can be usefully framed in terms of Henning Eichberg's (2010) concept of the "impossible game."

In an essay on the history and philosophy of pull and tug games, Eichberg describes the traditional Inuit game of Iqiruktuk (Glassford, 1976), or "mouth pull":

"Two human beings stand shoulder to shoulder. They each put their arms around the other's neck, mutually, symmetrically, like good friends. Opening their lips, they grab with their forefinger into the other's mouth. On a signal, they start pulling. The mouths and cheeks are distorted, the eyes are rolling, the sight acquires grotesque features. The competitors keep tugging. Intensifying their pulling, they turn their heads outward, trying both to relieve the pain and resist effectively at the same time. Finally, one of them gives up, at first slowly following the pull by turning his head, and then overtly surrendering by turning the rest of his body. He is overcome." (p.180)

As the starting point for his investigation, Eichberg raises the question of whether mouth pull qualifies as a "sport." If we characterize sport by bodily action, competition, and performance, then mouth pull certainly seems to fit the bill. Yet as Eichberg remarks, it is difficult to imagine mouth pull as an Olympic sport. If players were to engage in cutthroat competition, to the rule of "the stronger mouth wins," the game would surely lead to mutilation. Mouth pull is "impossible" in the sense that it is "impossible to carry through, if one really follows the rules" (p.191). Indeed, this tension is built into the very material and social circumstances of the game

Beyond just mouth pull, many games can be viewed as "impossible" in their own way. Eichberg points out that the common playground game of run-and-catch, if played strictly to the rule, will quickly isolate the slowest runner. To keep the game going, the faster players must flirt with danger by running close to the chaser. "If the process of play is to continue," Eichberg observes, "this can only happen against the rule, against the production of the 'fair' result of speed" (p.191). What sets mouth pull apart, then, is that it is impossible in an especially visceral way.

B.U.T.T.O.N., like mouth pull, is "impossible" in a very immediate sense. As demonstrated by Nicklas' ill-fated game in Malmö (described in the introduction), there are clearly limitations to how "brutally" the game should be played. Moreover, like run-and-catch, the game would destroy itself if players insisted on optimizing their chances of winning. An ultra-competitive player, for example, could refuse to put down the controller or follow any of the other instructions. This

would certainly be an effective strategy, but it would also defeat the entire purpose of playing the game. Such a player might very well win, but they would do so at the cost of "losing" the meta-challenge of being a good sport and a fun companion. In this way, impossible games compel players to take into account the preferences of their competitors and their audience.

In addition to this resistance to ultra-competitive play, games like mouth pull and *B.U.T.T.O.N.* are "non-sportive" in still other ways. There is something decidedly "unserious" about mouth pull, in a way that seems at odds with the seriousness of modern sport – or at least sport as it is sometimes portrayed by institutions like the Olympics. Modern "sport," as Eichberg depicts it, is characterized by "the solemnity of achievement production" (p.197) – the production of results and records, and the quantification of outcomes. Through its "ritual of the perfect achievement" (p.171), sport differentiates itself from other, more traditional forms of game and play. In this light, a festive game like mouth pull can be viewed as a kind of outcast or "joker" – its "'unserious' features of popular laughter and grotesque carnivalism stand in the way of [its] consequent sportification" (p.187). "An 'International Mouth Pull Federation'," Eichberg quips, "would sound strange" (p.187).

Eichberg's characterization of sport can be usefully applied in thinking about the achievements of commercialized digital gaming culture. In dissecting play activities into defined segments and demanding results, achievements, like Eichberg's "sport," reify an ideology of perfectionism. My contention here is not that this perfectionism is somehow "bad" in it of itself, but rather that it is also possible to design for other, alternative styles of play. To this end, unachievements and self-effacement represent attempts to reclaim the kind of festivity and laughter marginalized by the current culture of perfectionism and systems geekery. Intentionally "broken" or "impossible" games celebrate *imperfection*.

"The grotesque body," Eichberg argues, "displays what is imperfect in human form. The fool and the carnival are images of things going 'wrong' in life." Eichberg continues: "All this gives birth to laughter, which is thus linked to a deep recognition of human failure and blurs the edges between success and failure that are sharpened by the modern culture of perfection" (p.167). Laughter at failure – both at the failure of others and of ourselves – betrays a mutual vulnerability between players. And it is precisely this laughter-filled acknowledgement of vulnerability that nurtures a feeling of togetherness.

B.U.T.T.O.N., with an eye towards these relational qualities of laughter, attempts to establish such mutual vulnerability in a digital gaming context. The entire experience is designed to coax players into making themselves look silly, and into having fun doing it. The various commands, such as "Act like a monkey" and "Sing Happy Birthday," are doubly awkward given that the system doesn't even monitor then. We're acutely aware that it's we ourselves that choose to enforce these instructions. The rush to the controllers is similarly awkward, both physically and socially. Again, the context here is paramount. This messy scramble, so out-of-place in the familiar setting of controller-based console gaming, is unmistakably ridiculous. Laughter is not just a "side effect" of the game; it is "central to the social-bodily process" (p.162). Laughter occasions the game as much as the game occasions laughter.[15]

[15] Dormann and Biddle (2009), in their survey on the role of humor in computer games, reach a similar conclusion. Though they initially focus on how humor can "support" and "enhance" gameplay, the authors also call attention to the ways in which humor nurtures creativity: "Games are very good at being absorbing and at persuading people to play, but it is possible that in some ways the entertainment derives less from the scripted play and more from the stage that the game provides for the players themselves" (p. 810). In other words, humor not only enhances gameplay, it also facilitates the improvisation of *new* gameplay.

Figure 7 – Players at GAMMA IV, laughing while wrestling over the controllers.

"In festivity," Eichberg writes, "we get high in the here-and-now together" (p.195). The festivity of play and games reveals the supposed duality of objectivity and subjectivity – of "I-it" and "I-self" relations – as a false dichotomy. Play and games also evidence a third relation: "togetherness, body-to-body contact and the interaction between 'I' and 'you'" (p.193). Here, the practice of tickling serves as an evocative analogy. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, like tickling, cannot be played alone. It is only made possible by the company of an other – of a "you."

As Eichberg reminds us, "What is human in the human being is not – not only, not primarily – inside the skin-body, but it is in between human beings" (p.197). In foregrounding the dialogic relation between "I" and "you," unachievements and self-effacing games attempt to humanize digitally mediated gameplay in a very explicit way. Specifically, the ambiguity and physicality of these games work in tandem to shift the focus from formalized rule systems to interpersonal relationships. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, inspired by the festivity and laughter of folk games, advances one possible design strategy for nurturing a feeling of togetherness, confronting, in Eichberg's words, the "body we have" with the "body we are" (p.197).

The Well-Played Poorly-Played Game

On the surface of things, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* hardly seems like a congenial or "well-played" game. The game aspires not only to "abuse" its players (Wilson & Sicart, 2010), but also to inspire them to abuse each other.[16] Players frequently push, tackle, and otherwise brutalize one another. Cheating, as the game's title announces, is not only sanctioned – it's encouraged.

[16] In particular, the game can be viewed as "socially abusive" in that it tries to embarrass the players – or rather, it tries to get players to embarrass themselves. For example, one condition orders: "Any player who picks their nose, take 1 step forward." Here, the players face the dilemma of whether to admit to (or lie about) bad hygiene in order to gain a positional advantage in the game. The current version of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* also includes an optional "Naughty Mode" which features content that is sexually charged. In Naughty Mode, players are routinely instructed to strip off articles of clothing or to touch each other in awkward places (e.g. the stomach or the thighs). Underlying all of these shenanigans is the hope that mistreatment by the game will inspire players to mistreat one another – playfully and responsibly, of course.

What the players do, however, only tells part of the story. We should also consider player intentionality. A hard shove, for example, might speak to a ruthlessly competitive (instrumental) mindset, but it might also reflect a more self-ironic (performative) intention of doing something extreme, "just for show." Our aim in designing the game was to nudge players towards this latter mindset, with a special emphasis on performing together *with* the other players. The kind of attitude we were hoping to instill in our players can usefully be articulated in terms of Bernie DeKoven's (1978) notion of the "Well-Played game."

DeKoven, a self-described "FUNcoach," champions an approach to play and games that centers on the group identity of the people playing – the so-called "fun community." Players in a fun community, as DeKoven describes it, care more about fun and each other than they do about winning. This community-oriented attitude makes possible what DeKoven calls the "Well-Played game," loosely defined as an "experience and expression of excellence" (p. xi). This "excellence" is not a quality that can be quantified by measurements or results. Rather, the excellence of the Well-Played game stems from the manner in which the game is interpreted, played, and perhaps even modified – *together*. For DeKoven, maintaining a sense of togetherness is paramount. "Either we achieve it together," he admonishes, "or we don't achieve it at all" (p. 7).

This prioritization of togetherness over results does not imply that game rules themselves are irrelevant or that freeform play is somehow preferable to structured games. To the contrary, clear goals give us a focus of purpose, allowing us "to maintain our connection when that focus [is] transcended by our delight in the way we [are] able to play together" (p. 21). In other words, the structure provided by rules and goals serves as a perfect foil against which to celebrate one another, the human beings who are playing the game.

That said, DeKoven warns against a gaming culture in which rules become inflexible regulations: "Not only do we give our authority over to the referees and umpires, but we also allow their authority to be determined by an even larger authority, unnamed, unspecific, to which we ascribe the responsibility for determining the regulations by which we play" (p. 39). As such, it becomes crucial for the fun community to maintain its authority over the game: "It is strange that we would ever allow a game or a score to evaluate how well we've been able to play together – strange that we have ever allowed our authority to reside in anything other than ourselves" (p. 8). In a twenty-first century world where scholars and practitioners increasingly look towards computers to enforce rule systems for us, DeKoven's concerns seem more relevant than ever.

Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings (2007), for example, argue in their game design textbook that "The *most* important benefit computers bring to gaming is that the computer relieves the players of the burden of personally implementing the rules" (p. 18, emphasis theirs). In a similar vein, they warn that "Ambiguous or conflicting rules are a sign of bad game design" (p. 11). Self-effacing games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* demonstrate how limited this perspective is. Indeed, implementing rules need not be viewed as a "burden." Quite the opposite, the task of interpreting, enacting, and modifying rules enables us to tailor games to the specific people we play with and to the specific contexts we play within. As DeKoven reminds us, "Rules are made for the convenience of those who are playing. What is fair at one time or in one game may be inhibiting later on. *It's not the game that's sacred, it's the people who are playing*" (p. 53, emphasis mine). Our capacity to play *with* rules, together, is precisely what makes gameplay so deeply human.

DeKoven, writing from the 1970s, states nothing about digital games in particular. Nevertheless, the Ludica collective (2007a, 2007b), challenging what they see as the "technocentric culture of digital games" (2007b, p. 261), speculate on how DeKoven's notion of the Well-Played game could reinvigorate the design of computer-mediated games. Ludica imagine "a game that is created by and for the players within a safe digital environment built not to wield authority over

them but to provide an even playing ground in which they themselves are empowered to play: a temporary world that encourages a new, participatory relationship with *each other* rather than to a machine" (2007b, p. 277, emphasis mine). Inspired by Stewart Brand's "New Games" movement (Fluegelman, 1976), Ludica call for a "new, New Games" movement that could transform our expectations of how digital games can be designed and played.

B.U.T.T.O.N. offers one possible answer to this call. In the face of rhetoric touting the computer's ability to handle the rules for us, the game draws attention to its ambiguities – its unachievements – in an attempt to convince players that the Well-Played game is indeed attainable through digitally mediated play. The egregiously "broken" nature of the game – the fact that it doesn't enact but only prescribes most of its rules – opens up a highly visible space for players to bend the game to their own needs. To play the game "well" means to interpret the rules in creative ways, to gauge the appropriate intensity of physical play, and to find ways of cheating that are enjoyable for everyone playing. Sustaining a Well-Played game requires that players stay carefully attuned to the subtleties of context.

To be clear, it isn't *B.U.T.T.O.N.* itself that should be viewed as the Well-Played game. The game merely facilitates such an experience. Because there exists no one single game that can satisfy the needs of the fun community forever, we must be ready evolve or change a game when the community requires it. Nevertheless, intentionally broken games strive to be as accommodating as possible. Successfully or not, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* aspires to be a kind a gaming "platform" – a digital toy that beckons players to improvise their own gameplay. The game is only *disguised* as a well-formed console game in order to take advantage of the players' (mis)expectations.

DeKoven's notion of the Well-Played game also speaks to my team's motivations in making *B.U.T.T.O.N.* such a self-consciously silly game. Like Eichberg, DeKoven values the important role that humor plays in maintaining the sense of togetherness: "We need the humor. We need the foolishness. Our play community could never feel as important to us as it does if we ever thought it was really so terribly important" (p. 121). Humor acts as a defense against taking the game too seriously, and also against taking *ourselves* too seriously. Paradoxically, focusing *too* intently on the play community can disrupt the feeling of being "in the moment," thereby *impeding on* our sense of togetherness. As such, the abusiveness encouraged by *B.U.T.T.O.N.* actually provides a convenient cover for the Well-Played game that possibly underlies an outward show of brutality. The game cheekily avows that "rude" is the new congenial, so to speak.

Cheating, too, despite its negative connotations, can aid our pursuit of the Well-Played game. Specifically, cheating gives the fun community a tool for altering a game to its liking: "The Well-Timed cheat works because a game isn't working. It helps us regain a sense of play that we had lost in the process of maintaining a game that we were no longer interested in playing well" (p. 32).[17] DeKoven even goes as far as to suggest: "If you think it's a rule but you're not sure, see what happens when you break it" (p. 62). He qualifies this advice by recommending that we cheat openly, for everyone to see. In making our cheats visible, we signal that the cheat is for the benefit of the entire community, not just for our own personal gain.

[17] Mia Consalvo (2007), in her book on cheating in computer games, makes a similar observation. Consalvo's research indicates that cheating is sometimes geared towards "fixing" a game, not breaking it: "It's a way for individuals to keep playing through: boredom, difficulty, limited scenarios, rough patches or just bad games. Cheating, or however such activities might be differently defined, constitutes players asserting agency, taking control of their game experience" (p. 95).

Figure 8 – Players at IndieCade 2010, pushing each other while fighting over a shared controller.

Risk, danger, and "bad surprises" are all part and parcel of playing and gaming. Yes, playing well together can only happen if we feel safe within the game, but the definition of "safety" depends on the specific community of players: "We've constructed other things – such as the conventions of the play community, and the rules of the games we play – not to keep us from bad surprises but rather to help us maintain the balance, no matter what happens. That's the safety we're talking about" (p. 116). In other words, we shouldn't rely on technologies or rules to keep us safe, because "safety" is located, first and foremost, in the community of people playing.

DeKoven's view on safety and gameplay speaks to some of the attitudinal differences between games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and the pervasive games literature. For instance, Mueller et al. (2009), present their networked exertion game, *Remote Impact*, in which two geographically separated players compete by hitting a mattress.[18] Explaining the motivations behind the design, the authors point out that physically separating the players reduces the chance of injuries. This may indeed be true, but in focusing on how computing technology can "augment" gameplay interactions, the authors overlook what might be lost in ceding that authority to the machine. The possibility of bad surprises can actually work to strengthen our sense of togetherness. The risk gives us the opportunity to reaffirm the kind of safety and trust that can only be found in other human beings. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* reminds us that it is the *players* who are responsible for each other's well-being. This responsibility, as the Well-Played game teaches us, is equally enlivening as it is unnerving.

As children's folklorist Linda Hughes (1983) puts it: "Games aren't much 'fun' when rules, rather than relationships, dominate the activity" (p. 197). Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in the spirit of the Well-Played game, deliberately efface themselves in order to give those interpersonal

[18] In *Remote Impact*, the "shadow" of the opponent is projected onto the mattress, and the goal is to hit that shadow with any body part. The harder the impact, the more points that are scored. Inspired by the physicality of contact sports, the authors are interested in how the "brutal" qualities of sportive activities can be utilized in the design of human-computer interactions.

relationships more room to flourish – even when that flourishing calls for a little pushing and shoving.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I've used my own party game, *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as a case study through which to discuss the design of intentionally "broken" or "self-effacing" games – games that not only open themselves up to player improvisation, but that also *actively deputize* the players to uphold, reinterpret, and negotiate the rules as provided. I explained that these kinds of games are characterized by their "unachievements" – conspicuous absences of systemization that goad players to modulate their gameplay with a degree of self-irony and theatricality. Finally, using the work of Henning Eichberg (2010) and Bernie DeKoven (1978), I argued that self-effacing games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* aim to heighten, through festivity and laughter, a sense of *togetherness*.

Despite my interest in these types of games, I don't mean to cast them in an unconditionally positive light, as if they represented some utopian alternative. Indeed, my friend Nicklas' ill-fated experience in Malmö (described in the introduction) clearly demonstrates the potential pitfalls of a game so ambiguous and mischievous. All games, of course, are heavily contingent on players and setting, but self-effacing games seem particularly sensitive to circumstance. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* tries its best to shape the context of play, but given the degree of willful silliness and self-abandon required to sustain the game, it's no wonder that it falls flat in certain situations and for certain groupings of people. These limitations notwithstanding, my experience playing and exhibiting *B.U.T.T.O.N.* suggests that, with the right mix of people and the right frame of mind, the game does indeed nurture a sense of camaraderie through a chaotic kind of play.

Still, the issues raised in this article are larger than any single game. Though it's a convenient case study, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is just one example of one possible design approach. More generally, I've tried to advance the idea that game developers can design enjoyable digitally-mediated multiplayer games without needing to balance complex systems or grapple with cutting-edge technologies. Game design cannot be reduced to the art of crafting formalized systems. Sometimes, it can be more productively conceptualized as the creation of *festive contexts*.

Above all, I hope I have shown that enacting and negotiating game rules need not be viewed as a "burden," even in the context of digitally-mediated games. It can be deeply empowering, and even uproariously fun, to improvise and bicker over rules. By taking a more skeptical, confrontational stance towards the technologies with which we design, we might open up a fertile ground of underexplored design possibilities – hybrid forms where digital games are not so readily distinguishable from their non-digital predecessors. Drawing from the wisdom of folk games and children's play, games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* remind us that modifying and making rules is sometimes the most enjoyable game of them all – especially when done together.

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- Chapter 4 -

In Celebration of Low Process Intensity

In Celebration of Low Process Intensity

*"It's not that play is either rule or nonrule based but a question of **whose** rules in **which** contexts."*

-- T.L. Taylor (2006, p.157)

"As technologists, then, our concern is not simply to support particular forms of practice, but to support the evolution of practice."

-- Paul Dourish (2004, p.25)

It's Sunday night, and a lively crowd of game enthusiasts has gathered in the middle of IT University of Copenhagen's central atrium. We've just finished the 2011 Nordic Game Jam, an annual weekend-long event where professional and hobbyist game developers form teams and make small prototypes. The crowd has arranged itself into a giant circle, creating a makeshift arena around the play space. Controllers in hand, two players stand facing one another, engaged in a playful duel. They are playing a physical party game that I have just prototyped that weekend, called *Johann Sebastian Joust.*

J.S. Joust is a slow-motion jousting game for two to seven players, played with motion controllers. The central task of the game is to keep your motion controller sufficiently still. The game's soundtrack, J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2*, plays an integral role, hence the game's cheeky title. When the music plays in slow-motion, the motion controllers are extremely sensitive to changes in movement. When the music speeds up for brief periods, this threshold is raised accordingly. If a player's controller is ever moved beyond the allowable threshold, that player loses, signaled by a loud explosion sound and vigorous rumble feedback.[1]

The goal of the game is to be the last player remaining. What that entails in practice, however, is not so clear. A game in which players simply have to hold their controller still would quickly become a tiresome endurance match. An alternative way to frame the game is one in which players slowly approach one another and try to *make their opponents lose*. This can be accomplished with a wide variety of tactics, including pushing the opponent, hitting their controller, baiting them into moving too much, etc. This more aggressive, physical approach is the one I had been showcasing earlier in the day, in my public demos throughout the game jam.

Back to our two players dueling in the atrium – Agnieszka and Sidsel. By this point in the evening, the game has been running nonstop for over an hour. It will continue well into the night. A loose custom has been established such that the losing players offer up their controllers to new

[1] Though the original prototype was developed for the Nintendo Wiimote, the more recent version uses the PlayStation Move controller. This newer version of the game utilizes the controller's built-in LED light orb to help signal various pieces of game information. To warn the player that they are close to exceeding the loss threshold, the controller's light orb flickers (like a candle) and rumbles softly. To reinforce the feedback of being eliminated, the player's light orb turns red for about a second, then turns off completely. In these ways, the light orb allows other players and spectators alike to more clearly see the game state.

challengers, to allow as many people as possible to try the game. In this particular game, Agnieszka and Sidsel are about to produce one of the most memorable highlights of the evening.

As the music slows down, Agnieszka sets her sights on Sidsel and charges (in slow-motion, of course). Suddenly put on the defensive, Sidsel backs up equally slowly, wagging her finger as a warning to her oncoming attacker. Just when it looks like Agnieszka is taking control of the game, Sidsel makes good on her warning and executes a spectacular reversal; while somehow managing to keep her own controller steady, Sidsel kicks up her left leg. Her foot connects with Agnieszka's controller, which goes flying out of her hands. Agnieszka is eliminated, and Sidsel is the winner.[2]

Is such a kick even legal? Are players allowed to use their feet? In the short lifespan of the game, such a move had never been seriously attempted. Because the game system only receives input through the controllers' accelerometers, it's up to the players themselves to decide what kinds of material world actions are "kosher." In this particular case, however, Sidsel's kick requires no legalistic negotiation. The crowd, breaking into a thunderous applause, has already sounded its overwhelming approval.

Figure 1 – *J.S. Joust*, as played in the streets of Copenhagen, June 2011. Here, one player tries to kick his opponent's controller. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

[2] This memorable moment was captured on video and can be viewed on YouTube at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnkrGZTtPbU

Outline & Method

I have previously written at length about another physical party game I co-designed, *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (a.k.a. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*) (Wilson, 2011). In that article, I made the argument that certain kinds of intentionally "broken" or "self-effacing" games can help nurture a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play. Citing examples from mainstream games, indie games, folk games, and pervasive computing, I articulated what my own design approach shares with these precedents, and also what it tries to do differently.

This article is intended as an extension of that work. In this piece, I focus my attention on the game studies and game design literatures. In particular, I challenge certain value statements that continue to proliferate in discussions about what games are and how we should make them. As I will show, numerous scholars and practitioners alike have called attention to the computer-enacted rule systems that underlie most digitally-mediated games. In attempts to identify what distinguishes computer games from other media, these thinkers have frequently claimed, in some variation, that *rules*, above all else, are what constitute the "essence" of games.

Reflecting on *J.S. Joust* and *B.U.T.T.O.N.* as two complimentary case studies, I espouse a design philosophy that challenges that position. Quite deliberately, both games monitor only a fraction of the actions they instruct. As a design strategy, this conspicuous absence of technological systemization can be understood as an attempt to foreground social context. My argument is that it may not always be so productive to conceptualize digitally-mediated games as "computational systems," especially when designing for certain genres and certain contexts. To offer one possible alternative, I elaborate on the idea of game as *alibi* – as a culturally-recognized excuse to "act out" and play the fool. For the development of physical party games like *J.S. Joust* and *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, where the gameplay experience is so conspicuously dependent on context and player attitude, the credo of *deputizing* the players to enact the game themselves provides a useful articulation of what the designer's work actually entails.

First, I summarize Chris Crawford's notion of "process intensity" and other theoretical work that can be grouped together under the label of the "proceduralist" position. I argue that this position advances a number of value judgments about how we should think about and design digitally-mediated games. Second, I present case studies of *J.S. Joust* and *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as well as the design thinking that motivated them. Third, I use these two examples to illustrate a possible alternative set of design values. I also explain why my own design approach may not be so easily reconcilable with the proceduralist position. Finally, I situate my design approach in relation to Grant Kester's (2004) examination of community-based art practices. In particular, I explore what it might mean to reframe game designers as *context* providers (as opposed to just object makers). In looking towards the contemporary art world, I hope to provide an inspiring cross-disciplinary reference point for the design ethos I describe here.

At stake here is not just how we might understand games, but also how we might *create* them. Design values, like the ones I address herein, affect what kinds of games get made as well as how those games are received and judged. These kinds of discourses can exact a significant influence on the attitudes that guide our creative practices.[3] My claim is that systems-centric perspectives

[3] To offer one concrete example, Khaled and Ingram (forthcoming) reflect on the ways in which their serious games research project has been shaped by a focus on procedures and mechanics. They write: "Our choices regarding literature have undeniably been shaped by an awareness that we will need to proceduralise and computationalise these concepts, and work them into game components, mechanics, and scenarios." The authors acknowledge that this approach – of "proceduralizing" the project's core concepts

on digital games, both popular and academic, unintentionally marginalize a wider diversity of possible alternative approaches to game design. This argument is anchored in the belief that the ways we talk about design, as well as the ways we *don't* talk about design, affect the things we make. As such, in presenting my two case studies, I am less concerned with the games themselves than with the thinking and attitudes that informed the design process. It is partly for this reason that I have chosen to focus on my own creative practice.

The projects presented here were developed before I realized that they would be, or even could be applicable to my academic research. They were developed as projects with the Copenhagen Game Collective or with my studio, Die Gute Fabrik, in a social context that differs radically from that of my job as researcher. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilson, 2011; Wilson, forthcoming), I do not view my design work as a deliberate research "method." Rather, the research component of my work consists of the theoretical reflection presented in this article – a kind of literature-grounded creator's statement, written in a university setting. The two case studies are not intended to be viewed as validation that the games are indeed "successful" in some objective sense. They should instead be understood as evocative starting points for a cross-disciplinary discussion about digitally-mediated gameplay and how we might design for it.

On Process Intensity and Procedurality

"Process intensity" is a term popularized by game designer Chris Crawford in 1987. It signifies "the degree to which a program emphasizes processes instead of data" (2003, p.89). "Data" here refers to multimedia elements like graphics, sound, and text, whereas "process" refers to the algorithms that operate on and arrange that data. In his advice to aspiring game designers, Crawford advocates "process-intensive programs" over "data-intensive programs." As Crawford sees it, computation comprises the very essence, or "schwerpunkt" of the computer. [4] Indeed, he identifies process intensity as the defining measure of "computeriness."

Citing the computer's ability to enact rules, carry out calculations, and present results, Crawford claims that computers are particularly well-suited for "interactivity" – more so than any other medium. Moreover, he argues that "interactivity" happens to be the very essence of games, "the one element that is more than important, more than necessary, but indeed the entire point and purpose of games" (p.72).[5] This observation leads Crawford to formulate a strong compatibility between games and computation. He claims that processing power "made games so much more compelling" (p.73).

This emphasis on the processual or "procedural" capabilities of computer technology has been a hallmark of digital media theory more broadly. Like Crawford, a number of scholars have tried to articulate the formal properties that distinguish computer games from other media forms. Janet

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into mechanics – has not only affected the design of the game itself, but also *the very lens* through which they choose to view the entire project.

[4] Crawford uses the German word *schwerpunkt* for additional emphasis. In his words: "It means 'focal point' or 'concentration of effort point' or 'central point of attack.' It's a beautiful word because it expresses an idea that we just don't have in English: the notion that, in any effort, you have many necessary tasks, but there is no one central task that must take first place in your considerations." (p.71).

[5] Though Crawford acknowledges that "play" might be another way to frame the "essence" of games, he argues that the term "play" is fuzzier than that of "interactivity," and therefore less useful.

Murray (1997) and Ian Bogost (2007), for instance, both emphasize that the computer's ability to execute procedures (i.e. rules) is a defining, if not *the* defining characteristic of digital media.[6] We might term this perspective the "proceduralist" position (Sicart, 2011).

Murray famously identifies four essential properties of digital media, describing it as procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. Comparing these four properties against one another, she elaborates that the procedural and participatory are "more fundamental" in that they "provide the basis for what we think of as the defining experience of the digital medium" (p.6). Murray, who is centrally interested in the representational and expressive capabilities of digital media, singles out procedurality in particular. She writes that "The most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational power is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions" (p.274). As Murray sees it, aspiring digital media artists, from interactive storytellers to game designers, will ultimately distinguish themselves by harnessing complex algorithmic thinking towards creative ends.

Bogost (2007), following Murray's lead, argues that computer-enacted procedures open up new modes of representation and expression. In particular, he centers his investigation on videogame "rhetoric," i.e. how games might be used to mount claims about and critique cultural and political values. Situating videogames within and against the history of more familiar forms of rhetoric ranging from the spoken to the visual, Bogost argues that videogames offer a fundamentally different type of rhetoric. "Procedural rhetoric," as he terms it, operates via algorithmic processes. As an example, Bogost (2008b) explains how the simulation game *Animal Crossing* models economic life in a way that conveys lessons about long-term debt and consumerism.

Positioning his theoretical framework against work in the serious games literature, Bogost argues that the true "power" of videogames lies not in their narrative, visual, or textual content, but rather in their ability to communicate through procedures. "This ability to execute a series of rules," he writes, "fundamentally separates computers from other media" (2007, p.4). As Bogost describes it, rules are what "construct the meaning of the game" (2008b, p.121). Videogame play, in this view, can be understood as the manipulation of symbolic systems provided by the game.

Speaking as a practicing game designer, my concerns center around what these proceduralist theories *prescribe*, both implicitly and explicitly. As Crawford, Murray, and Bogost frame it, the computational capabilities of digital media carry with them a number of imperatives for how we should design. In particular, all three authors are unambiguously critical of digital media that foreground multimedia content (e.g. images, text) over computational process.

[6] I should note that Murray herself has expressed criticisms of overly formalist approaches to game criticism. Responding to "ludologist" scholars like Espen Aarseth at the height of the so-called "ludology vs. narratology" debates of the early '00s, Murray argues: "Because the game essentialists want to privilege formalistic approaches above all others, they are willing to dismiss many salient aspects of the game experience, such as the feeling of immersion, the enactment of violent or sexual events, the performative dimension of game play, and even the personal experience of winning and losing" (2005, p.1-2). Though I certainly agree with Murray on this point, her earlier work, as I argue below, positions some properties of new media (i.e. procedurality) as more "salient" than others. As such, I would argue that Murray and the ludologists, despite their differences, both ultimately privilege computationally-enacted rules. In the passage cited above, Murray does acknowledge the "performative dimension" of gameplay. But in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Murray, like the ludologists, echoes essentialist art theory that values art works which "refine and purify the perceived essence of a given medium" (Kester, 2004, p.46).

Crawford explicitly advises his readers to "Eschew data-intensive designs; aspire to process-intensity" (p.92). According to Crawford, process intensity – and specifically high process intensity – provides "a useful criterion for evaluating the value of any piece of software" (p.89). Though he recognizes the value of graphics and sound, he positions them in a clear secondary role to "interactivity," which he urges "must be given primacy in our designs" (p.75). Crawford ultimately concludes that "the very notion of low-interactivity games is intrinsically wrong-headed" (p.84). By "low interactivity," he seems to mean low process intensity.

Bogost, building off Crawford's work, identifies procedurality as the "principle value" of the computer (2007). "Higher process intensity," he writes, "suggests that a program has greater potential for meaningful expression" (p.27). If multimedia content like images, sound, and text are "constructed, selected or sequenced" by code, Bogost reasons, then surely "Image is *subordinate* to process" (p.25, emphasis mine). Emphasizing this hierarchical ordering of formal elements, Bogost critiques other scholars of digital rhetoric for sometimes "mistaking subordinate properties of the computer for primary ones" (p.25). As in Crawford's work, the implicit judgment here is not that multimedia content is somehow unimportant, but rather that videogames which emphasize data over process end up wasting their true promise.

In a similar vein, Murray famously criticizes early World Wide Web sites and CD-ROMs as "multimedia scrapbooks." As Murray sees it, digital media should not just remediate earlier forms, but instead should utilize their own "intrinsic properties" (p.67). This leads her to stress the importance of "[identifying] those properties native to *the machine itself*" (p.64, emphasis mine) – properties like the computer's ability to enact procedures. Murray seems to equate this charge with algorithmic complexity. She argues that the computer "was designed to *embody* complex, contingent behaviors" (p.72, emphasis mine). Here, videogame design is framed in almost cybernetic terms, i.e. as the task of modeling behaviors and systems.

Notably, this privileging of systems is also echoed in popular game design wisdom. Tracy Fullerton (2008), in her game design textbook, admonishes: "If you want to be a game designer, try looking at the world in terms of its underlying systems" (p.8). She advises that students look for design inspiration by examining their interests in terms of objects, behaviors, and relationships.[7] In their own textbook, authors Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings (2007) initially make an effort to eschew the notion that games can be understood as systems of rules. They explain: "We prefer that you think of a game as an activity because that focuses your attention on the player – the person for whom the game is made – rather than on the rules" (p.12). But in trying to articulate the difference between videogames and their non-digital predecessors, they do indeed embrace design values that frame game design in terms of computational systems. For instance, they write that "The *most* important benefit computers bring to gaming is that the computer relieves the players of the burden of personally implementing the rules" (p.18, emphasis theirs). The implicit argument here is that computer-enacted rules comprise *the* most salient feature of videogames. This judgment ultimately leads Adams and Rollings to discourage certain kinds of designs: "Ambiguous or conflicting rules are a sign of bad game design" (p.11).

Other practicing game designers, too, have echoed the proceduralist stance. Rod Humble (2006), for instance, locates rules at the very "center" of game design practice. Though he admits that games can "benefit from" other elements, Humble argues that rules are ultimately the only thing

[7] Fullerton's description of game design as "hosting a party," however, is far more resonant with the design approach I advance in this article: "The results are not always predictable or what you envisioned. A game, like a party, is an interactive experience that is only fully realized after your guests arrive" (p.3).

needed for a game to "succeed as a work of art." Brenda Brathwaite (Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010), writing about her acclaimed boardgame *Train*, emphasizes the same sentiment:

> "The rule set […] of any game, is the single most important thing a designer crafts. The rules of the game are the game. The pieces, the parts, the board? The table, computer or console? The graphics, the viewpoint, the angle of the camera? They are all there for one reason only – to allow us to play out the rules. They embody the game, they help to immerse us, but they are not the game. The rules are" (p. 317).

In this passage, Brathwaite equates games with systems of rules. Moreover, she establishes an unambiguous hierarchy between rules and other formal elements of games.[8] Brathwaite's phrasing here provides a useful crystallization of certain values statements that underlie the proceduralist approach to game criticism and design (Sicart, 2011).

Placed in its historical context, all this focus on procedures and rules can be read as a response to dominating trends in multimedia design, game development, and game analysis. Arguably, calling attention to rule systems provides a welcome counterbalance to mainstream game development practices that prioritize high-end, high-budget graphics at the expense of innovating on what the player *does* in those games. Moreover, scholarship on computer-enacted game rules challenges (or at least complements) game analyses that fixate on audiovisual content. Espen Aarseth, for example, has famously criticized "visualist" approaches to game analysis. Addressing film theorists in particular, Aarseth writes: "The game gaze is not the same as the cinema gaze, although I fear it will be a long time before film critics studying computer games will understand the difference" (p. 52). Like the authors discussed above, Aarseth turns his attention to rule systems, asserting that the computer game is "the art of simulation" (p. 52).

The problem is that proceduralist theory, at least when framed in normative terms, marginalizes (even if unintentionally) other design possibilities. My contention here is twofold. First, as I will argue throughout this paper, we cannot satisfactorily "rank" the formal aspects of games in

[8] For me, the irony here is that Brathwaite's *Train* (which I had the opportunity to try myself at IndieCade 2010) is a perfect demonstration of the *shortcomings* of proceduralist theory. First, as Brathwaite herself describes at length (2010, 2011), her boardgames have an important sculptural dimension to them. *Train*, which is a game about the Holocaust, is constructed on a bed of glass (a Kristallnacht reference). The players even pull the rule sheet out of a Nazi typewriter that Brathwaite herself sourced. For *One Falls for Each of Us*, another one of her boardgames about the Trail of Tears, Brathwaite is meticulously coloring and preparing 50,000 Native American game pieces, one for each victim. Here, she is deliberately playing with sense of scale to help convey the gravity of the tragedy. In both cases, Brathwaite has rejected the idea of producing additional copies of the game. In short, I would argue that games like *Train* and *One Falls for Each of Us* are just as much pieces of sculpture as they are "game systems." To frame rules as the single "most" important element undervalues the role of the very deliberate process behind the game's development, as well as the physicality of the final product. Second, *Train*, not unlike *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, features an intentionally ambiguous ruleset. Brathwaite's hope is to make players "complicit" in their simulated acts, and to encourage them to improvise alternative strategies and new endings. As such, I would argue that the rules themselves are overshadowed by the social interaction and interpersonal exchange that emerges around the game. As Brathwaite herself tells it, most games of *Train* are followed by serious discussion that frequently last an hour or even more. These kinds of discussions, both during and after the game, are an integral part of the game experience. On this point, I find it telling that Brathwaite sees rule lawyering as a "game mechanic." As I see it, this kind of negotiation cannot adequately be reduced to the formalism of "mechanics." Rule negotiation always happens in a particular sociocultural context, between particular players from different backgrounds (see Taylor, 2012). Brathwaite's emphasis on rules and systems therefore undersells what players bring to such an open-ended experience.

relation to one another. From a design standpoint, multimedia elements like image and sound may indeed inform the very heart of a creative game design practice. Second, such a formalist perspective is inherently limited. In particular, framing game design as the art of "system design" makes the critical mistake of focusing too intently on the media object itself. Too often, we give short shrift to the social and cultural contexts in which those games are situated – and not just existing contexts, but also the contexts that players shape and create through their play.

To be clear, I do not mean to advocate for some kind of radical social determinism. Obviously, the things we make and the code that drives them can play an essential role in shaping player experience. Rather, my concern is that *over-privileging* computer-enacted rules marginalizes a diverse ecosystem of possible hybrid approaches that might otherwise flourish in the gaps between conventional videogames and other media forms. There exists a fertile space of game design possibilities beyond formalized systems and computational algorithms – a space where players are rallied to improvise their own gameplay and appropriate games to their own purposes.

In the following sections, I present case studies of two such games – two digitally-mediated, physical party games that I designed or co-designed. Both games were developed under a mindset that differs radically from the proceduralist perspectives cited above. In particular, both games challenge wisdom that claims computational rules to be *the* single most salient aspect of digitally-mediated games. I hope to demonstrate that there exist some promising, very deliberate approaches to designing low process intensity games.

Case Study #1: *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now (B.U.T.T.O.N.)*

B.U.T.T.O.N. (2011) is a highly physical party game for 2 to 8 players, played with Xbox controllers or keyboard.[9] Previously, I have written about the game in relation to folk games and play theory (Wilson, 2011). In this section, after briefly reintroducing the game, I turn my attention to its textual and audiovisual elements, as well as to the contexts which those elements both shape and are shaped by.

The basic gist of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is that multiple players race to their controllers through physical space. Each round, players follow a series of instructions that appear on the screen. First, they are instructed to put their controllers down. Second, they are ordered to take a number of steps backwards, away from their controllers. Third, they are given some kind of command or task (e.g. "Lie on the floor" or "Act like a monkey"). Finally, after a short countdown, a randomly chosen win or lose condition is displayed (e.g. "First player whose button is pushed 15 times wins"), tacitly encouraging players to rush towards the controllers. After a certain window of time, the round ends and the results are displayed. Players can then begin another round.

[9] We have also experimented with alternative input devices. At the 2011 Independent Games Festival, we replaced the controller with a dance pad. In July 2011, at an exhibition at New York City's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the game was installed with oversized buttons the size of small trashcans. Perhaps most radically, for our "Killscreen vs Scandinavia" party in March 2011 we commissioned four cardboard "controller suits," worn by human performers. Into each costume was embedded some form of wireless input device. The result was that players, instead of scrambling to inert plastic controllers, raced to dancing performers. The fun, of course, was that the controller-performers could decide on the fly to run away, to help a particular player, to interfere, etc. For me, these kinds of alternative input devices/installations are exciting because they open up forms of digitally-mediated play that are decidedly theatrical, sculptural, and performative. That said, I also believe that there are certain advantages in taking traditional, familiar technologies and repurposing them in new and unexpected ways. I expand on this thinking below.

Figure 2 – Screenshot of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* The game tries to coax its players into cheating.

I describe the game as both "broken" and "self-effacing" (Wilson, 2011). I call the game "broken" because it fails to enact the very rules it decrees. The computer does not try to monitor whether you took exactly six steps back, or if you did indeed spin around five times. Moreover, the rules are inherently riddled with ambiguities. How is a "step" measured? Is unplugging another player's controller cheating "too much"? In a very obvious way, it's up to the players to interpret the rules and referee themselves. Viewed in relation to most conventional videogames, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* gives a distinct impression of "incompleteness," as if the system were somehow defaulting on its end of the bargain. We, the players, are forced to pick up the computer's slack.

Furthermore, I call the game "self-effacing" because it goes out of its way to encourage subversive play, goading players to bend, break, and extend the rules. "Unfair tactics" is the name of the game, both figuratively and literally. One in-game message, for example, reminds the players that "it's totally OK to push other players' buttons." To be clear, I do acknowledge that *all* games allow for "house rules" and player appropriation (Consalvo, 2007; Harper, 2010; Jakobsson, 2007). Rule negotiation, as T.L. Taylor (2012) puts it, is a "consistent feature" of digital game culture. The difference here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* gleefully smears these considerations in the players' faces, providing an occasion to actively celebrate these oft-neglected facets of console gameplay. In other words, the game is not self-effacing merely because the rules are ambiguous, but rather because it signals an acute *self-awareness* of that ambiguity.

In designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, we conceptualized the game as more than just a system of computational rules. Above all, we wanted to convey a particular sense of humor and a particular mood. For this reason, we should acknowledge the broader multimedia experience that the game delivers. Graphics, sound, and text all play an essential role in setting the right tone.

Both the game's graphics and music are intentionally stupid. The visual aesthetic, by Nils Deneken, relishes in its animated rainbows and neon wireframes, as if targeting the stereotypical stoner. The silly characters dance idiotically on their buttons, and cry giant tears when they fail to win. The music, by Nicklas "Nifflas" Nygren, features a whimsical blend of retro-styled game soundtrack and elevator music. Our hope was to get players dancing along to a series of tunes as catchy as they are obnoxious. One command even instructs players to "Dance like your avatar."

Similarly indispensible is the game's textual content, which instructs the players what to do (and, in some cases, what not to do). In a certain sense, those texts *are* the game. From an algorithmic standpoint, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* amounts to little more than a randomized billboard, taking a rudimentary button-press detector and dressing it up with sequences of timed texts. In short, the amount of computational "game logic" has deliberately been minimized. Moreover, as with the graphics and the music, the texts were written to be cheeky in terms of both content and style. Some texts, rather than introducing new "game mechanics," are geared instead at evoking a particular mood or emotion. This especially true of the "socially abusive" content (Wilson and Sicart, 2010), which aims to make players laugh or feel awkward.[10]

The takeaway here is that *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, as a digital media object, relies less on programmed rules and more on the irreverent spirit of its textual and audiovisual content. Or, more accurately, it relies on the appropriations of human players who are emboldened by that spirit. In this way, deliberately broken games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* compel players to consider context – their competitors and their audience.

Figure 3 – Screenshot of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* The game features deliberately silly graphics.

[10] One instruction, for example, reads: "Wealthiest player, take one step forward." Other prompts ask players about their personal hygiene. The Xbox version of the game even comes with a "Naughty Mode" that instructs players to strip off articles of clothing.

Case Study #2: *Johann Sebastian Joust*

J.S. Joust, as described in the introduction, is not as explicitly "self-effacing" as *B.U.T.T.O.N*. The game does not actively prod its players to cheat. Nevertheless, it does feel markedly "incomplete," especially in comparison to most other accelerometer games. Not only does the system fail to specify what we are and aren't allowed to do in the physical world, it also fails to describe what, exactly, the players are supposed to do or how they should arrange themselves. Though I continue to demo *J.S. Joust* as a highly physical, "make your opponent lose" jousting game, the underlying system is open-ended enough to support a much wider variety of games.

Indeed, the story behind the development of *J.S. Joust* underscores the extent to which our particular framing of the game is a product of player appropriation and social context. Partially inspired by the "Animal Tracker" minigame from *Wii Party* (2010), I had originally conceived of the project as a racing game. The idea was that three players, with motion controller in hand, would race across the room to a fourth controller. With this idea in mind, the changing tempo of the music was designed as a means for baiting the players into moving too fast.

It is a fortunate accident that I had not yet implemented the functionality of that fourth controller when I started playtesting the game. The open-endedness of that my prototype allowed us to improvise a significantly different game from the one I had initially imagined. To determine the right sensitivity of the accelerometers, my colleagues and I repeatedly staged races across the room. Eventually, we set aside the more specific goal of racing in order to experiment with how fast we could move at different acceleration thresholds. The breakthrough moment soon followed when Nils and I happened to find ourselves walking towards one another from opposite sides of the room. Staring at one another, face-to-face, each of us silently hatched the same mischievous plan; as soon as we were in range, we shoved one another in an attempt to make the other lose.[11] In that one instant, it became clear to us that the game we *actually* wanted to make was one that involved an antagonistic duel.[12] In a certain sense, it is debatable whether I even "designed" *J.S. Joust*. As I see it, Nils and I pulled the game out of the social ether, collaboratively.

Even within our own specific framing of the game, *J.S. Joust* encourages a wide variety of house rules. In some rounds, we agree to keep the controller on our heads, or in our pockets. Other rounds, we might decide to play crawling on our knees. In this sense, the game can be viewed as a digitally-mediated playground game. *J.S. Joust* demonstrates a more toy-centric approach to game design in which players are tasked with elaborating their own rules around a playful object – in this case, a simple acceleration-sensitive device that dynamically adjusts to the music.

[11] *J.S. Joust* draws influence from a simple game that Nils and I had improvised (along with our friends Bernie and Ida) in Christiania back in 2010. In the game, two players stand on opposite ends of a tightrope or balance beam and slowly charge at one another. The first player to hit the ground – either due to his own imbalance or to a physical confrontation at the center of the rope – is the loser. This kind of "precarious," face-to-face physical confrontation is the very dynamic around which *J.S. Joust* operates.

[12] Partially inspired by my work on *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, I had indeed intended that the racing game could devolve into pushing and shoving. However, it wasn't until my impromptu faceoff with Nils that I realized that the game might be more enjoyable if this antagonism was made more explicit, i.e. if players were instructed to move *towards* each other, rather than side-by-side.

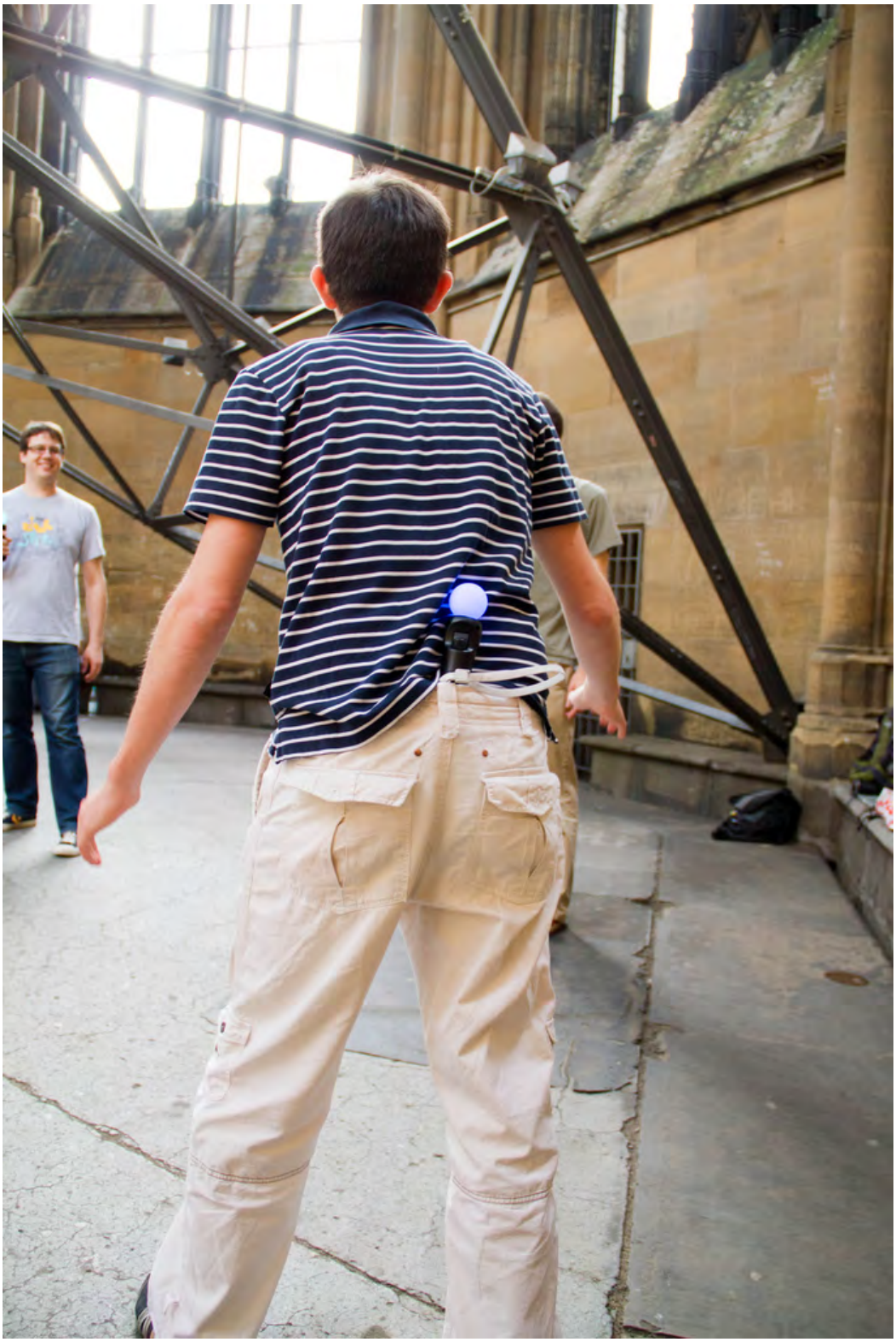

Figure 4 – *J.S. Joust*, in Cologne, August 2011. A player tries tucking his controller into his pants. (Photo by Dean Tate).

Figure 5 – *J.S. Joust*, as played in the streets of Copenhagen, June 2011. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

Much like a playground sport (say, pickup basketball), *J.S. Joust* requires its players to gauge an appropriate intensity of physical play. How hard can I push my opponent? Will they mind if I try to kick them? An anecdote may help to illustrate the deeply contingent nature of the game: earlier this year, we had our friends Erik and Matt try the game. At one point, Matt ended up shoving Erik into a wall, with unexpectedly violent force. The maneuver might have been welcomed by a more physical player, but for Erik it was clearly beyond his comfort zone. This anecdote serves as a reminder that this kind of game requires its players to stay attuned to the subtleties of context.

As in *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, the music in *J.S. Joust* plays an essential role in setting the tone. The choice of J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* was quite deliberate. The playful transgression of listening to the music at such comically slow and fast tempos becomes all the more absurd given that Bach's music is so renowned and so "high culture." As such, my claim here is that the music cannot simply be viewed as a formal element "subordinate" to the game rules. Ultimately, *J.S. Joust* is as much a piece of dance choreography as it is a "game."[13] Moving along to silly music in slow-motion becomes a kind of freeform play, deeply enjoyable in it of itself.[14]

[13] The choreographic nature of *J.S. Joust* is especially evident when exactly three people are playing. With defensive strategy in mind, players will typically try to shield the arm that holds the controller. As a result, each player will often move away from one particular opponent next to them, ultimately leading the three players to pace around in a circular pattern that resembles a waltz.

[14] In some sense, moving in slow-motion is doubly fun; it is pleasurable in an immediate, bodily way, and it also plays off our cinematic imagination (i.e. the obligatory slow-mo action sequence). My interest in slow-motion games is no doubt influenced by a folk game, Liste Lanser (translation: "Sneaky Lance"), played by my local gaming community at parties. In Liste Lanser, two players faceoff blindfolded, each with a wooden spoon in hand. The first player to hit the other wins. The twist is that both players must move in slow-motion, enforced by the spectators. Once again, this linkage speaks to the considerable debt my design practice owes to the simple folk games and playground games played amongst my peers.

In their attempt to identify the supposed "defining" characteristics of videogames, essentialist perspectives risk overlooking the internal "logic" of more traditional media. A piece of music like J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* certainly suggests its own kind of "rules," i.e. rhythm, harmony, and even sociocultural associations – rules that are interpreted, negotiated, and internalized by listeners and performers. To be clear, I don't mean to suggest that these properties are somehow equivalent to computer algorithms. Rather, my point is that music can play just as important a role in shaping how players act and perform. The design lesson here is that it isn't always so productive to treat multimedia elements like graphics and sound so hierarchically, least of all as "subordinate" to rules of a more algorithmic stripe. As Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky) – writing on the relationship between music, media, and his own work – so aptly phrases it: "the soundscape is a palimpsest that encourages play" (p.53).[15]

Figure 6 – Three of us playing *J.S. Joust* in Cologne, August 2011. (Photo by Dean Tate).

[15] In regards to my own creative practice, I find Miller's writing deeply inspiring. Miller depicts a radical kind of media synesthesia, framing certain media forms in terms of other ones. He writes: "Dj-ing is writing, writing is Dj-ing. Writing is music, I cannot explain this any other way. […] Obviously, you feel the rhythm inside a great poet's stanzas, but it's there within the great philosophers' paragraphs as well. So many media and cultural techniques of interpretation coexist – reading, watching, listening, surfing, dancing – that this textual/sonic synasthesia demands a great deal from us" (p.57).

Multimedia, Spectacle, and the Art of "Deputizing" Players

Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* remind us that computationally-enacted rules are not the only, or even the "most" salient characteristic of digitally mediated games. In this section, I'd like to reflect on several other aspects of computer technology that open up fruitful design opportunities for game developers.

First, consumer technologies like game consoles offer a powerful tool for packaging together and presenting compelling multimedia content like graphics, video, music, and text. This point may seem curiously obvious; indeed, as discussed above, many critics contend that videogames have relied *too heavily* on such content. Nevertheless, games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* demonstrate how we might recast Murray's specter of the "multimedia scrapbook" as an opportunity to interface with other traditions like folk games, music, and dance.[16] From a formal perspective, the two games amount to little more than glorified button-press or acceleration detectors dressed in timed sequences of textual messages and audiovisual content. That's the whole point. Both games are *proud* of their low process intensity. In these games it is the responsibility of the players, not the computer, to enforce many of the game rules. *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* make a concerted effort to foreground what happens *outside of* the computer, between human beings. For this reason, it is precisely those "characteristic" properties of digital media that both games disavow. The key difference between these two examples and Murray's multimedia scrapbook is that deliberately low process intensity games signal an acute self-awareness of this fact.

In developing both *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, our aim was not to design a readily consumable game system, but rather to *deputize* the players to interpret, enforce, and even modify the rules we prescribe. In other words, the bulk of our design challenge resided not in engineering systems of rules, but rather in successfully rallying the players to approach the game with sufficient silliness and self-irony. To this end, graphics, music, and text serve as essential tools for setting the right atmosphere and shaping, however partially, the context in which the game is played.

Second, technologies both old and new can be leveraged to create a visible *spectacle*. In the case of the *J.S. Joust*, the colored light orb built into the PlayStation Move controller has played a key role in generating excitement around the new Move-enabled version of the game (see Footnote 2). The curiously entrancing glow of the orbs frequently draws a crowd, especially when the game is demoed in low-light settings. Even the simple act of registering your controller becomes a pleasurable experience: upon pressing the button, the colored light switches on, accompanied by a satisfying, shimmering sound effect. This alluring mix of technology, light, and sound plays off personal and cultural imagination, conjuring up images of *Star Wars* lightsaber duels and other

[16] Beyond raucous party games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, there exists a wider diversity of approaches to designing low process intensity games. For example, a more multimedia-heavy, screen-based approach can be found in the work of researcher and game designer Dan Pinchbeck. Pinchbeck's experimental *Half Life 2* mod, *Dear Esther* (2008), is in some sense more a virtual world or interactive story than it is a goal-oriented "game." Pinchbeck (2008) writes: "There are no goals or action sequences, just an environment to explore with embedded music and voice-over triggers. Additionally, the game contains no AI, making the player's engagement with the piece rest entirely with the narrative, visual environment and audio" (p.51). Nevertheless, *Dear Esther* employs many familiar tropes of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre. Moreover, Pinchbeck's team released the mod to a fan community of self-described gamers who received it in the terms of gaming culture. Pinchbeck explains: "we wanted to release games that pushed the envelope whilst remaining appealing for gamers" (p.51). For these reasons, I agree with Pinchbeck's insistence on calling *Dear Esther* a "game," despite its hybrid nature.

science-fiction touchstones.[17] Players are often eager to toy around with the controller, regardless of the particulars of the game rules.

Admittedly, as the Move controller becomes more commonplace this spectacle will likely wane. Part of the appeal of *J.S. Joust* is its "newness" – the newness of both the technology itself and of the way the game employs that technology. For that reason, it might be tempting to dismiss spectacle as a passing gimmick or fad, a mere "secondary" feature of computer technology that fails to exploit the "essence" of the medium. What such logic misses is that games are as much a *practice* as they are a "medium."[18] Games are *enacted*, within particular contexts and often in the service of playfulness.[19] A game like *J.S. Joust* operates on the belief that spectacle, technological or otherwise, can be both beautiful and energizing. Especially in regards to party and street games, public spectacle comprises the heart and soul of what those activities *are*.

Third, dovetailing off the previous point, games and digital technology both bring with them a host of expectations and sociocultural associations that designers can appropriate or subvert. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, for instance, makes a spectacle out of repurposing the old and familiar. Quite intentionally, the messy scramble to the controllers feels decidedly out-of-place; wrestling your opponents just isn't what you typically *do* when playing a console or PC game.[20] Likewise, *J.S. Joust* makes a spectacle whenever it is showed in an outdoor public place because PlayStation Move games aren't typically played in the street, or on the beach. This subversion of cultural and social norms can indeed become its own source of pleasure. There's a certain thrill in using conventional gaming devices in ridiculous, "unsanctioned" ways. The lesson here is that it can be productive to look beyond the formal properties of technology itself, towards the interplay *between* that technology and its surrounding contexts. The shortcoming of highly formalistic

[17] Bart Simon (2009a) makes a similar point in regards to the Wii version of LucasArts' *Star Wars* game, *Force Unleashed* (2008). Though the Wiimote fails to live up to the promise of high-fidelity embodied swordplay, Simon argues that there is "a certain pleasure that might derive from this failure of control." In the context of the *Star Wars* franchise, the rudimentary, "minimalist gestures" supported by the game invite the player to play-act and perform exaggerated movements. As Simon sees it, "the entire weight of 25 odd years of Star Wars culture demands satisfaction and so one learns to manoeuvre in the wedge that expectation creates." Simon's notion of "gestural excess" (Simon, 2009b; Wilson, 2011) speaks to the strengths of deliberately low process intensity designs. Additionally, his articulation of gameplay as "expression of shared or social imagination" (Simon, 2009a) helps explain the appeal of *J.S. Joust* and the way the game uses the colored lights of the PlayStation Move controllers.

[18] This broader view on game as practice or cultural space has been elaborated extensively in the literature on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) (e.g. Pearce, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2004; Taylor, 2006). As Taylor argues in her work on the MMOG *Everquest*, "Play is situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one's non/game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures and personal understandings of leisure" (p.156). This wisdom applies equally well to small-scale, co-located games. Indeed, deliberately low-process intensive games actively call attention to these contingencies.

[19] As Henning Eichberg (2010) argues, a game can be productively conceptualized as a *situation* – one "whose totality can never be caught in all its dimensions" and which "constitutes and epistemological contrast to structures and processes, which can be objectified" (p.192).

[20] On an ideological level, we hoped to confront technological optimism with an attitude more ambivalent and absurd. Rather than try to "enrich" the material world with new technology, the game takes existing technology and tries to *disenchant* it. See my previous work (Wilson, 2011) for a longer discussion about the game in relation to the pervasive and ubiquitous computing literatures.

definitions of "game" – particularly definitions that try to isolate properties of the "thing itself" – is precisely that they overlook these deeply contingent but potent creative opportunities.

Paul Dourish (2001) makes a similar point in his critique of various HCI theories which "attempt to decontextualize events from the circumstances in which they occur in order to uncover their abstract essentials" (p.235). Drawing from phenomenology and ethnomethodology, Dourish argues that formal content and context cannot be viewed so independently of one another. Taken to heart, this lesson can usefully inform the way we go about designing games. In the case of *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, our key creative breakthrough – to get players racing to the controllers – was not won by merely grappling with "mechanics" or rules, but also by considering how game systems both shape and are shaped by a broader gaming culture.

Figure 7 – *B.U.T.T.O.N.* at Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art, July 2011. (Photo courtesy Sparkle Labs / Flickr).

Figure 8 – *J.S. Joust* at Babycastles, New York City, September 2011. (Photo by Bennett Foddy).

Figure 9 – *J.S. Joust*, attracting a crowd in the streets of Copenhagen, June 2011. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

Thinking Beyond "Systems"

One might object that my reading of the proceduralist position is unfairly narrow. For instance, couldn't we simply broaden the notion of "systems" to encompass *social* processes? After all, in both *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, the players do negotiate *rules*. It seems plausible that theorists like Crawford would indeed welcome the two games (and other games like them) as highly "interactive" in the sense that they demand active and sustained participation.

Still, I would claim that the proceduralist position, at least as typically framed, cannot so easily be reconciled with the design ethos outlined in my case studies. The tension between the two perspectives runs deeper than mere questions of scope, (i.e. how broadly we define "process"). To be clear, the point is not that the proceduralists outright dismiss everything other than systems of rules. The thinkers cited above, too, would likely agree that games and gaming encompass much more. Rather, my contention is that their particular theoretical framing is haunted by a number of subtle but problematic value judgments and blind spots.

First and foremost, systems-centric theories tend to conflate computer games with software, and interactivity with computation. Crawford, for instance, specifies that the task of the game designer is "to *automate* interactivity, to replace one of the participants in the conversation with a machine" (p.77, emphasis mine).[21] Adams and Rollings make a similar point, explaining that it is the *computer* that enforces the rules of videogames: "In most video games, the computer sets the boundary of the magic circle because player actions are meaningful in the game only if the machine can detect them with its input devices" (p.18). It's not so surprising, then, that design thinkers like Crawford, Adams and Rollings, and Humble dismiss the notion of radically open-ended computer games. Their skepticism is that the science of artificial intelligence is simply not advanced enough to improvise new rules or author custom-tailored content for us. Adams and Rollings, for example, write: "No computer can create absolutely unconstrained play; software can offer the player only the actions that the designer chooses to implement, and the program will always be limited by the amount of memory available" (p.138). Note that in this view, the task of "creating" gameplay is largely framed as a technical challenge – one delegated to the machine.

Bogost, likewise, shortchanges the "procedural" capabilities of human beings. He writes: "Because procedurality is intrinsic and fundamental to computers, and because computers are much more flexible as an inscription medium than human agents, they are particular suited to procedural expression" (2007, p.10). Human beings, as Bogost sees it, are less reliable: "It is difficult to coerce even a small group of people to execute a particular process again and again, without rest and without incentive" (p.10). Bogost's particular framing here betrays a subtle but problematic assumption. In evoking the metaphor of "inscription" and the image of executing a "particular" process "again and again," Bogost depicts videogame rulesets as necessarily coherent and *stable*. This assumption is perhaps most apparent in his claim that "the gestures, experiences, and interactions a game's rules allow (and disallow) make up the game's significance" (2008b, p.121). Here, as in Crawford's and Adams and Rollings' work, it is the *rules themselves* that "allow" interaction. Authority is ceded to the machine. Bogost (2006) emphasizes our ability to interpret, reflect on, and respond to game systems, but he fails to adequately account for how

[21] On this point, I second Stewart Woods' (2007) contention that single-player and multi-player games cannot satisfactorily be viewed as variants of the same form. As Woods puts it, "A multiplayer game is not a simulation to be tinkered with, but a simulative experience that is upheld by player consent" (p.22).

authored rules – even computational ones – are inevitably repurposed and destabilized by human actors who fuse them together with their own personal, social, and cultural practices.[22]

A critical shortcoming of these perspectives is that they forget that human beings, too, are good at "interactivity." When we focus so intently on computation, we risk overlooking alternative views on interaction design. Games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* foreground how we might conceptualize the computer not as a singular authority tasked with orchestrating interactivity on our behalf, but rather as a *material* – one that can be shaped by both designers and players.[23] The problem with systems-centric theories is that they so frequently neglect (even if they do so unintentionally) these alternative design possibilities, almost as if they didn't even exist.

One might object that the thinkers cited above merely aim to describe "traditional" computer games. Arguably, physical games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* should not be treated as computer games, but rather as *games that simply happen to use computers*. Though I do find this distinction evocative, I also worry that it reifies a normative conservatism. First, such a defense underestimates the extent to which even the most traditional computer games are subject to rule ambiguities and disputes (Consalvo, 2007; Harper, 2010; Jakobsson, 2007; Taylor, 2012). Second, this logic frames alternative design approaches as curious exceptions, rather than as possible opportunities. As *B.U.T.T.O.N.* demonstrates, it's possible to make these kinds of context-foregrounding games with even the most conventional of technologies.

As Dourish reminds us, "[abstract] rules and formal categories are valid and relevant only to the degree that people enact them, point to them, adopt them and demonstrate them to each other. The shared reality of a rule is a *consequence*, not a *cause*, of the fact that people choose to follow it" (2004, p.23, emphasis his). With that point in mind, we need not accept Adams and Rollings' claim that ambiguous or conflicting rules are a mark of "bad" design. Quite the opposite, we might embrace deliberate ambiguity as one possible strategy for championing, as Dourish phrases it, "the process by which context is continually manifest, defined, negotiated, and shared" (p.26). In regards to the design process, the idea here is that we might shift our attention away from

[22] In his defense, Bogost does turn his attention to player performance in some of his more recent work. In an essay (2009) on gesture and Brenda Brathwaite's *Train*, Bogost applauds how the ambiguity of the game rules opens up for player improvisation. Making a similar point about *Dance Dance Revolution*, he writes: "its life as a venue for public performance was born from the spaces the game didn't measure between steps, spaces players felt compelled to fill with improvised maneuvers of their own." Though I certainly agree, this point cannot so easily be reconciled with the formalism of his earlier work (2006, 2007), for reasons outlined above. This tension shows itself in Bogost's essay on performative play (2008a), in which he writes: "Performative gameplay describes *mechanics* that change the state of the world through play actions themselves" (emphasis mine). My contention here is that the term "mechanics" places too much focus on the formal system. Especially in a game like *Dance Dance Revolution*, the relationship between computational system and player performance is loose at best. Meaningful gameplay gestures, as Bart Simon (2009a, 2009b) argues, often happen *in spite of* the game system. From a designer standpoint it isn't always so productive to think about open-ended physical gameplay in terms of formal mechanics.

[23] Anna Vallgårda (2009) argues that the computer, like any material, is "a physical substance that shows specific properties of its kind that can be proportioned in desired quantities, and that can be manipulated into a form" (p.42). However, Vallgårda points out that computation itself is not perceivable by human senses. For this reason, the computer must always be alloyed or "composited" with other materials, such as the plastics of keyboards or the liquid crystals of screens. When human players enter the discussion, computation (and by extension, rule systems) cannot adequately be treated in isolation of sensory elements.

computational rules themselves and towards those interstitial points where gameplay slides into other forms of expression and where coded rules meet communities of practice.[24]

Leveraging Contexts, Providing Alibis

Bogost, writing on how games can be used to persuade and mount claims, states that "Videogames themselves cannot produce events; they are, after all, representations" (2007, p.332). Perhaps videogames themselves cannot "produce" events, but they can certainly *catalyze* them. In a certain sense, that's exactly what games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* are – event-catalyzing apparatuses. For this reason, theory-practitioner Gonzalo Frasca (2004) is equally off-the-mark when he writes: "Neither art nor games can change reality, but I do believe they can encourage people to question it and to envision possible changes" (p.93). Yes, games can push us to reflect and to contemplate. But they can also do much more. They can inspire performance, color social interaction, and give additional texture to interpersonal relationships. In short, "representation" is not the only lens through which we might view games. We can also conceptualize them as *festive occasions*.

At issue here is a tension between two different views on the craft of digital game design: one which focuses on games as *objects* (i.e. with formal properties), and one which sees games – even digitally-mediated ones – in terms of *performance* and interpersonal exchange.[25] Obviously, there isn't one right choice. Nor are these two views necessary incompatible with one another. Nonetheless, as I argue above, the game design literature has privileged the former while largely neglecting the latter. Drawing inspiration from performance art, community art, and other contemporary art practices, I'd like to suggest that we game designers might alternatively understand ourselves as *context providers*, rather than as object makers.

Contemporary art theorist Grant Kester (2004) offers one compelling answer as to what such an approach might entail. In his work on "dialogical aesthetics," Kester examines a particular type of participatory art practice that aims to mobilize community and nurture dialogical interaction. This movement toward direct interaction, Kester writes, "decisively shifts the locus of aesthetic meaning from the moment of creative plentitude in the solitary act of making (or the viewer's reconstruction of this act) to a social and discursive realm of shared experience, dialogue, and physical movement" (p.54).[26] Kester's argument is that art doesn't just have to anchor discourse in a "fixed representational order" (p.87). It can also "enact community here and now through the process of physical and dialogical interaction" (p.58). In this view, art is not necessarily a material thing, but also, potentially, the very facilitation of intersubjective engagement and social interaction.[27]

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[24] This phrasing is borrowed from an earlier essay on the relationship between gameplay and music (Wilson, 2008).

[25] For other work that emphasizes the role of performance in computer games, see Henry Lowood's (2010) work on "beautiful play" and the notion of player as artist.

[26] In terms of contemporary art, another relevant precedent here would be Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) work on "relational aesthetics." Personally, I find Kester's framework to be more productively evocative, and will therefore choose to focus on his work in this article. For two sharp critiques of Bourriaud's theory, see Claire Bishop's (2004) "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" and Hal Foster's (2004) "Chat Rooms."

[27] The idea that we might locate art in performance or social interaction itself rather than in an object informs a much wider range of contemporary art practices than the narrower range of approaches that

One of Kester's central examples is Austrian arts collective WochenKlausur's *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*. The piece consisted of a series of "boat colloquies" on Lake Zurich, organized by WochenKlausur in 1994. Each meeting, staged on a cruise boat, featured a diverse gathering of constituents from the city of Zurich, including politicians, journalists, activists, and sex workers. The topic of the meetings was drug addiction in the city, and specifically female addicts who had been driven to prostitution and even homelessness. As WochenKlausur (n.d.) tells it, many of the women "have almost no legal rights and are at the mercy of pimps, customers, dealers and the police." As a direct outcome of the boat talks, the various participants were able to agree on the creation of a boardinghouse that would provide a safe haven for the addicts and give them access to various services. According to Kester, the boardinghouse still functions today.

Kester argues that framing the talks within the sphere of the art world played a key role in facilitating a concrete outcome: "in the ritualistic context of an art event, with their statements insulated from direct media scrutiny, [the participants] were able to communicate outside the rhetorical demands of their official status" (p.2). The insight here is that our society allows special "latitude" to activities labeled as "art." As WochenKlausur's Wolfgang Zinggl observes:

> "The context of art offers advantages when action involves circumventing social and bureaucratic hierarchies and quickly mobilizing people in positions of political, administrative or media responsibility to accomplish concrete measures. An invitation from an art institution provides WochenKlausur with an infrastructural framework and cultural capital, while the exhibition space serves as a studio from which the intervention is conducted" (as quoted in Kester, 2004, p.101).

In short, the prestige bestowed by established art institutions offers a valuable form of societal legitimacy and opens up unique opportunities to shape people's expectations. In this view, the "art" of WochenKlausur's intervention can be understood as their successful leveraging of the cultural context of the art world to catalyze a series of sociopolitical relationships.[28]

To be clear, the kinds of projects that Kester discusses in his book are both structurally and ideologically very different from the two case studies I describe above. In games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, the formal "object" – i.e. the audiovisual content, and, yes, the

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Kester describes in his book. For me, one especially relevant example here is the work of Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović. Identifying the human body as a key strategy for provoking minimally mediated aesthetic experiences, Abramović and Ulay (her partner of the time) write in their 1980 "Art Vital" manifesto: "Immaterially transmitted energy causes energy as a dialogue, from us to the sensibility and mind of eye witness who becomes an accomplice. We chose the body as the only material which can make such an energy dialogue possible" (Westcott, 2010, p.148). For more on Abramović's work as it relates to game design, see my work on "dialogical game design" (Wilson, forthcoming).

[28] Also key to the success of the piece was an attitude of playful transgression – one that WochenKlausur embraced to outright manipulate officials into agreeing to attend the meetings. As WochenKlausur (n.d.) recounts: "a trick was also used here: first the mayor was invited and told that his colleague, the Socialist party secretary, would also be participating, but only if the mayor had also committed himself. Flattered in this way, the mayor agreed, and half an hour later the same result was achieved with the party secretary. Because the governing Socialist party got involved, the other parties also pledged their participation, and the journalists soon followed."

computational rules – still plays a very visible role. Furthermore, on a political level, the community-based art practices that Kester champions are targeted at much more specific constituencies. Those projects are "designed" in a far more participatory fashion. Yet despite these differences, Kester's examples encapsulate a number of potent ideas that are relevant not just to the art world, but also to creative practice more generally. Following WochenKlausur, designers might embrace an approach which focuses specifically on leveraging the sociocultural particularities that follow certain media forms and social worlds.

Games, as a societal practice, occupy a privileged space where absurdity, raucousness, and silliness are all culturally sanctioned, at least to some degree. In this sense, games can be conceptualized as a kind of *alibi* – a recognized excuse to act out and perform the ridiculous. Festivity and carnivalism have long been a hallmark of folk games and play culture (Eichberg, 2010).[29] In regards to physical party games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*, it is precisely this *sociocultural function* of games that stands out as the "salient" design opportunity.

B.U.T.T.O.N., not unlike WochenKlausur's boat colloquies, leverages the special latitude given to games, but does so in order to coax players into playing the fool. While playing *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, I typically feel empowered to roughhouse my opponents, make strange noises, act like an elephant, and so forth. Moreover, the game not only encourages this behavior – in some sense it *requires* it. Indeed, as discussed above, there is very little "game" beyond these silly directives, unmonitored by the computational system. We're acutely aware that it is we ourselves that choose to enforce these instructions. On an aesthetic level, the game, like the art practices that Kester describes, attempts to foreground how our experience is "conditioned by a given social context or physical situation" (p.54). In short, the game's computationally procedural underpinnings get eclipsed by the lack thereof, as well as by the particular situation in which the game is played.

In a humdrum formalistic sense, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* are not just "games," but also self-directed theatrical performances that *masquerade* as well-formed games. Interpreted as such, they use the familiar trappings of computer games – win/loss conditions, game controllers, and so forth – as a form of "sugarcoating" intended to make the silly directives more palatable. The game-like structure, viewed as a kind of Trojan horse, is employed in a decidedly instrumental fashion, in the service of providing that alibi for players to carry out those performances.

This point is well-illustrated by the bowing custom that has been adopted by my local play community when playing *J.S. Joust*. Inspired by the baroque style of Bach's music, several players started taking showy, "gentlemanly" bows before each round. Much like typing "gl hf" ("good luck, have fun") before a *StarCraft* (1998) match, the bow serves as a conciliatory gesture towards one's opponents. But it is also deeply theatrical, in a way that allows players to revel in the aesthetic of the game. I contend that these bows cannot simply be dismissed as something secondary to the "core" game. For me, it is precisely these improvised customs and performative gestures that comprise the heart and soul of the game experience.

[29] As Eichberg defines it, "Festivity is an existential meeting where human beings create a fugitive experience here and now" (p.119). I find this notion of game as "fugitive experience" to be usefully evocative. In the pursuit of festivity, how do we, as designers, nurture this "fugitiveness"? In my earlier work (Wilson, 2011), I coined the term *unachievement* to describe the delicate balance of encouraging subversive play without going so far as to "sanction" that subversion.

The takeaway here is that games themselves, as formal objects, are frequently outshined by the performance or "meta-game," *especially* in the case of rowdy party games. Though a game might first *appear* to be well-structured and goal-oriented, the messy reality of it can be very different indeed.[30] Positioned at the intersection of game culture and other traditions like dance, theater, and improv, deliberately low process intensity games flaunt their hybrid nature. The hope is that the playfulness of the gaming mindset can be harnessed to actuate new kinds of performance.

Figure 10 – A *J.S. Joust* player raises her controller above her head, just before taking a ceremonial bow. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

Conclusion

Janet Murray has mused that it is "surprising how often we forget that the new digital medium is intrinsically procedural" (p.71). Today, we might counter that it is even more surprising how often we forget that *human beings* too can enact procedures – and not only enact them, but also create, change, and argue about them, all with relative ease. As children's folklorist Linda Hughes (1983) puts it: "Games aren't much 'fun' when rules, rather than relationships, dominate the activity" (p.197). Hughes' wisdom, more than just an observation about games, can also be adopted as a conscious design *ethos*. Deliberately low process intensity designs remind us that we need not cede all or even most of our authority to the machine.

[30] The relevant dichotomy here may not be that between "play" and "game," but rather, as Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) articulates it, between "play" and "playfulness." As Sutton-Smith phrases it, play is that which "plays with the frames of the mundane and sticks to its purpose of being a stylized form […] in which the expected routines or rules guide and frame the action in a steady way throughout" (p.148). Playful, by contrast refers to the intension to play *with* the very frame of play. This articulation is useful because it shifts our attention from the *form* that the game takes (i.e. closed-system, open-system) to the *attitudes* of the players. It is exactly this playful mindset that *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* hope to nurture.

To be clear, I don't mean to imply that low process intensity games are categorically "better." There is nothing "wrong," of course, with focusing on the opportunities that computationally-enacted procedures open up for game designers. The problem is that certain formalist theories, in attempting to identify the "essential" qualities of computer games, perpetuate a certain set of normative design values. Even if we accept that computational rules are central to digitally-mediated gameplay, we need not think about the design process in those terms. How we think about (and *don't* think about) games affects the things we make. As such, it is important to challenge dominant value propositions and offer alternative theoretical frameworks.

In contrast to Fullerton's advice to aspiring game designers to look at the world in terms of systems, my experience designing *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* suggests a different starting point: find an activity that's already fun – say, roughhousing your friends, or moving in slow motion – and only then work to iterate a game system into the mix. Sometimes, the more rough-hewn the better. The designer's task, in this approach, becomes one of selling the players on this incompleteness, partly by setting the right mood. Seen this way, game design is reformulated as a *motivational* challenge (i.e. how do I convince players to *convince themselves* to act silly?).

The lesson here is straightforward, but bears repeating: there is something crucial that transpires in those *in between* places, where computational systems run up against other media forms and situated practice. Those designers who make the effort to tackle that betweenness head-on may well discover exciting possibilities for the future of digitally-mediated gameplay – a future that is decidedly performative and readily malleable to our improvisational whims. Like Paul Miller (2004) says: "It's the twenty-first century. Things should be really wild. Anything else is boring" (p.25).

Figure 11 – *B.U.T.T.O.N.* at IndieCade 2010, Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy IndieCade).

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- Chapter 5 -

When Are “Broken Games” Actually Broken? Lessons from Two Conference Game Experiments

When Are "Broken Games" Actually Broken? Lessons from Two Conference Game Experiments

It was the fourth day of SIGGRAPH 2009, and my four collaborators and I were sitting in a drab, nondescript conference hall in New Orleans, Louisiana. SIGGRAPH is an annual conference on computer graphics and interactive technologies, attended by tens of thousands and my team had been flown out all the way from Denmark to run a conference game that we had designed called *The Collectible Business Card Game* (*CBCG*).[1] Our mission was to enliven the event and bring attendees together in a more informal, social setting.

In this original version of *CBCG*, each player builds a "deck" out of real business cards that they have collected at the conference. The goal is to assemble a fictional game company using the personnel in your deck. The twist is that the players must themselves determine the numerical "value" of each card played.[2] The game offers no mechanisms for making decisions and resolving disagreements. Instead, it is up to the players themselves to collectively negotiate each valuation.[3]

Though *CBCG* clearly delineates what "winning" is, it also introduces incentives to play for social capital, regardless of the game objectives. A hyper-competitive player could in theory refuse to compromise. But such behavior would risk prematurely ending the game in a standoff, and would clearly violate the so-called "spirit of the game." The intention was to render competitive play impossible, or at least inadvisable, such that players would be compelled to focus more consciously on *how* the game is played.[4] We had hoped that such an open-ended game would incentivize conference attendees to seek out each other's business cards, as well as give them an opportunity to gossip.

Sitting there at SIGGRAPH, however, the harsh reality was that almost nobody was coming by our station. Over the first three days, we had used our student volunteers to run demonstration games, in an attempt to attract other conference-goers. Towards the end of the week, however, we had all but given up. We felt a little pathetic, and we must have looked it too. As a group of eager students struggling to run a somewhat geeky game, we lacked the relevance to garner attention. At first, we tried to focus on our small successes – the friendly guy who enjoyed a few rounds with us, or the two young students who returned to show us all the business cards they had collected. But by the fourth day, we had finally accepted the game for what it was: a failure.

[1] *CBCG* was originally designed by me and Lau Korsgaard. During early playtests, we were helped by Mike Khamphoukeo. At SIGGRAPH, the three of us were joined by Christoffer Holmgård and Benedikte Mikkelsen

[2] As an example, imagine my opponent plays Will Wright's business card. Since all cards are scored from 0 to 4, my opponent might claim that Wright, a famous game designer, deserves the highest possible score of 4. If I felt like being difficult, I might try to counter-argue that Wright, despite his popularity, actually deserves a lower score. I might try to appeal to my opponent that some of Wright's recent games failed to live up to the hype. The hope here is that I can use clever or humorous argumentation to get my opponent to compromise on a lower valuation.

[3] The full rules for the SIGGRAPH 2009 version of *CBCG* are available online: http://wiki.siggraph.org/index.php?title=CBCG_-_Rules

[4] As such, *CBCG* stands as a good example of what Henning Eichberg (2010) calls an "impossible game" – a game that is "impossible to carry through, if one really follows the rules" (p.191). *CBCG* is impossible in the sense that it will comes to a standstill if players aren't willing to compromise on each other's valuations. In previous work (Wilson, 2011) I have written at length about this concept as it relates to the design of digitally-mediated games.

Figure 1 – The team demos *The Collectible Business Card Game* at SIGGRAPH 2009.

Figure 2 – Some attendees playing *CBCG* at SIGGRAPH 2009, using our demo cards.

Background & Outline

Previously, I have written about *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (*B.U.T.T.O.N.*), a digitally-mediated party game in which players race through physical space to their controller(s) (Wilson, 2011). I describe the game as "broken" because it deliberately fails to enforce the very rules it decrees. Furthermore, I call the game "self-effacing" because it goes out of its way to encourage subversive play, goading players to bend, break, and extend the rules. Like *CBCG*, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is self-effacing not just because its rules are ambiguous, but also because it signals an acute self-awareness of that ambiguity. I have also written about another one of my physical party games, *Johann Sebastian Joust* (*J.S. Joust*) (Wilson, forthcoming). The game is a no-graphics, motion-based dueling game played with PlayStation Move controllers. *J.S. Joust* is not as explicitly self-effacing as *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, in that it stops short of actively prodding its players to cheat. Nevertheless, it does feel playfully ambiguous and open-ended compared to most other motion-controlled games. Despite its digital underpinnings, many of the core rules must be enforced and negotiated by the human players.

Along with *CBCG*, these kinds of games raise a number of knotty questions. Why are some broken or low process intensive games more successful than others? Can we distinguish between "good" ambiguity and "bad" ambiguity in a game system? And if these kinds of intentionally ambiguous games rely so heavily on the players to "complete" the experience, how do we even judge the game systems themselves?

The broader question of how we evaluate deliberately provocative and radically open-ended designs is one that continues to haunt the design research literature (Boehner et al., 2005; Dunne, 2005; Gaver, 2008; Hallnäs and Redström, 2001; Höök et al., 2003; Leahu et al, 2008; Sengers and Gaver, 2006). Gaver et al. (2009) argue that designers can indeed make "definitive assessments of success or failure" (p.2214), even when designing such radically open-ended systems.[5] To offer a concrete example, the authors present a case study of a deliberately playful home monitoring system that ultimately failed to engage its users. Reflecting on the qualitative data they gathered, the authors try to articulate some of the project's shortcomings, and identify a generalized set of "symptoms of failure" (described below).

This paper draws from Gaver et al.'s work, and presents case studies of two experimental, non-digital conference games that I co-designed in 2008 and 2009. The first case study features *CBCG*, which we had the opportunity to run at several conferences. Despite a number of attempts to fix the game's shortcomings, *CBCG* was ultimately a failed experiment. The second case study features *Fuck You, It's Art!* (*FYIA*), a somewhat similar, non-digital argumentation game that three friends and I debuted at IndieCade 2009. Though *FYIA* is not quite as explicitly "broken" as *CBCG*, it is also deliberately open-ended. Like the other games mentioned above, *FYIA* aims to foreground performance and clever argumentation over the final win-loss outcome.

[5] Gaver et al. (2003) famously argue that ambiguity can serve as a valuable resource for design. In this view, ambiguity can "compel people to join in the work of making sense of a system and its context" (p. 237). In addition, Gaver (2008) has advocated for a more playful or "ludic" approach to design, especially when designing for leisure. Emphasizing the limitations of more instrumental approaches to design, he writes: "Pursuing such an instrumental version of 'fun' does not help provide an alternative model for computing. On the contrary, it co-opts play into the same single-minded, results-oriented, problem-fixated mindset that we have inherited from the workplace" (p. 166).

Reflecting on both conference games, it is clear that the public debut of *FYIA* was far more "successful" than the various incarnations of *CBCG*. Nonetheless, articulating this kind of comparison is tricky, especially since both games depend so heavily on the players and on social context. Yet it is precisely because this comparison is so difficult that the endeavor is worthwhile. Evaluating deliberately ambiguous games offers not only lessons about designing for social play, but also broader insights about the relationship between gameplay and sociocultural context.

This paper is organized into three main sections. First, I discuss the second major iteration of *CBCG*, which we ran at IndieCade 2009. I try to articulate how that version, much like the SIGGRAPH variation that preceded it, ultimately fell so flat. Second, I recount my experiences designing and running *FYIA*, which we ran at the same conference. Finally, I compare the two games against one another, and also with *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust*. I identify two key considerations when designing games that aim to facilitate social interaction in public settings: *spectacle* and *subversion*. Drawing from theoretical work on embodiment and situated action, I argue that it is often counterproductive to conceptualize "context" as something separate from the game content itself.

Though I focus primarily on two non-digital games, I would argue that these case studies offer useful lessons for the HCI and interaction design communities. The design of deliberately ambiguous, open-ended systems remains a difficult, underexplored challenge. Design considerations like spectacle, subversion, and social context are pertinent to interaction design regardless of what underlying technologies are used (or not used). Indeed, towards the end of this paper I'll explain how the insights articulated herein echo my experience working on digitally-mediated game projects.

The Collectible Business Card Game, Take #2

As previously described, *CBCG* is a deliberately open-ended card game in which players repurpose real business cards that they have collected. The game was originally playtested by Lau Korsgaard, Mike Khamphoukeo, and me at the 2008 Nordic Game Conference. Inspired by collectible card games like *Magic: the Gathering*, we decided to do something silly with the many business cards we had amassed. We especially enjoyed the way in which the game subverted our sense of competitiveness. Though all three of us had sought out what we each considered the "best" business cards, we were continually forced to compromise with each other's arguments and retorts, simply to keep each game going.

Following our disappointing experience at SIGGRAPH, we tried to identify how we could better replicate the memorable experience that Lau, Mike, and I had improvising the game at Nordic Game Conference. Was the game nothing more than a personal joke? Or could we make it palatable to a broader audience?

Later in 2009, I was invited to run the game again at IndieCade, a four-day festival in Los Angeles focused on the art and culture independent games.[6] We hypothesized that one problem behind running the game at SIGGRAPH was that the community was too broad and unwieldy. It can be difficult to engage *CBCG* if you've never heard of the persons listed on your opponents' business cards. After all, there is

[6] I ran seven different sessions on the Friday and Saturday nights, during the dedicated Happy Hours in the hotel lobby. I was joined by two friends, John Shedletsky and Dan Salinas (both game developers themselves), who volunteered to help me run the game. To document these playtests, I recorded them on audio tape and also jotted down brief notes throughout the sessions. After returning to Copenhagen, I prepared partial transcripts of the recordings then wrote a preliminary report based on my observations and experiences.

little more to the game *aside from* gossiping about those personnel. We hypothesized that IndieCade, unlike SIGGRAPH, would provide a tight-knit community, and therefore a more suitable social context.[7]

We also modified the written ruleset in several ways.[8] First, we tweaked the pacing of the game such that it would last a shorter amount of time. Each round, players would play one card of a particular job (i.e. artist, programmer, producer, etc.). Rather than assign each card a numerical valuation, the players would collectively rank those cards relative to one another. This gave the game considerable more direction, and turned the freeform debates of the original version into a kind of semi-structured voting game. Second, we added a "pitch" at the climax of the game. After the rounds of hiring and ranking, each player had to present a narrative of their resultant company and the fictional game it was producing. Then, players had to vote on the "best" presentation, defined by whatever criteria they saw fit. The hope was that if players had to improvise a story around their chosen personnel, they would focus less on winning the game and more on public performance – the story they would tell and how they would tell it.

Figure 3 – *CBCG* at IndieCade 2009, played at the hotel bar. (Photo by Vincent Diamante, via Flickr).

[7] We also tried to "market" the game ahead of time (somewhat unsuccessfully). A month before IndieCade, I emailed out the rules to all the speakers and game makers, asking them to design a custom rule. About twenty of the attendees replied with their own custom rules, which we printed on the corresponding "demo" business cards which new players could use when learning the game. Our intention was to generate buzz around the game, and to set the expectation that CBCG would be an exercise in collaborative, improvised game design.

[8] The full rules for the IndieCade 2009 version of *CBCG* are available online: http://www.copenhagengamecollective.org/uploads/CBCG_IndieCade.pdf

Unfortunately, the IndieCade sessions, much like our SIGGRAPH experience, were a resounding disappointment. On the whole, the festival-goers seemed disinterested. Typically, we were only able to attract one or two people per game. When we did run the game, we were not able to attract spectators. None of the attendees seemed interested in collecting business cards for the game.

The rounds we managed to run did show some glimmers of the kind of social and performative play we had hoped to nurture. The presence of the pitch mechanic successfully encouraged players to think more carefully about whom they were playing and how that person would fit into a possible narrative. Players seemed to enjoy crafting narratives about what their companies were doing and why. These pitches turned out to be the most popular part of the game, providing some of the most memorable laughs. One particularly rich example is one game that Dan, John, and I played with a young boy. Unintentionally, the kid played my own personal card, which prompted Dan and John to joke about how "I" (the fictional me) was going to wreck his company. By the end of game, he had picked up on the joke, and his presentation went straight for the jugular. Right in front of me, he pitched an autobiographical, metaphorical train sim game that tells the story of the "train wreck" that is Douglas Wilson's life.

Players almost universally observed that the game was more enjoyable the more they knew about the people on the business cards. Reflecting on her play experience, one player remarked: "I'm glad I waited [to try the game] until today so that now I know more people." In fact, when playing multiple rounds, it quickly became dull to play the same cards. One player voiced a concern that he was drawing too many of the same cards as he had last round, and voluntarily took a "mulligan" just for the sake of variety. This suggests that the "game" itself is somewhat secondary to the argumentation about the people.

That said, people did typically strive to "win" the game. More often than not, players argued in favor of the card they played, regardless of what they actually thought about the person. Because ranking conversations would often ramble on, one player would typically take on a moderator role in order to help resolve the discussion and move the game along. However, these ranking discussions would sometimes resolve themselves in a more organic fashion when one player would make a particularly creative or performative argument. In one instance, a player whipped out a certain game on his iPhone to demonstrate why the developer in question should be given a higher ranking. This turned out to be a persuasive argument, as the other three players acquiesced without further objection.

Bright spots notwithstanding, it was clear to me by Saturday evening that *CBCG* had not lived up to my goal of facilitating social interaction between the festival-goers. To better articulate the nature of this failure, we might begin by looking towards the work of Gaver et al. (2009) on evaluating deliberately provocative and open-ended designs. The authors identify four key metrics of success:

- **Engagement** – whether the users continue to engage with the system over time
- **Reference** – whether the system is understood in terms of other familiar experiences
- **Accommodation** – whether the users integrate the system into their life rhythms and activities
- **Surprise and insight** – whether the system continues to occasion new surprises

Applying these criteria to my experience running *CBCG* at IndieCade 2009, it is clear that the game's two major shortcomings were its failures to engage and to accommodate. As Gaver et al. argue, the metric of success for these kinds of designs is not necessarily "explicit declaration[s] of liking" (p.2219), but rather continued use and interpretation over time, as well as the enthusiasm of the discussions generated. Thus, the question is not whether the festival-goers "liked" or "disliked" *CBCG*. The point is that they barely seemed to notice it at all. It was a struggle to attract participants, and the players who did try the game did not return to reengage it. We had (perhaps naively) hoped to design a game experience that would weave itself into the social tapestry of the conference – that in trading business cards with other attendees,

players would also be participating in our game, intentionally or not. The reality, however, is that the festival-goers did not integrate *CBCG* into their broader conference experience.

The tough question here is: to which factors should these shortcomings be attributed? Was the game system itself (the stated rules) to blame? Did we fail to "market" the game adequately? Or did we simply choose the wrong context to deploy the game? In order to better address those questions, I would first like to recount my experience running another game at the very same conference.

Fuck You, It's Art!

Unlike *CBCG*, *FYIA* is a game that we designed *during* the conference. After the first day of IndieCade, Dan, John, and I had all observed that a main talking point of the conference (at least at the various panels and talks) was the relationship between indie games and the art world. The issue of art and games - a notorious debate within the broader gaming community – seemed to "haunt" the conference. On our way to lunch, John blurted out an idea for a game called "Fuck You, It's Art!" without much thought for how such a game would actually work. We found the phrase so promising that the three of us, along with friend and fellow game developer Jeff Lait, brainstormed a possible design over lunch and fleshed out how it would work. Quite literally, the game design originated from that phrase, as a satire of the "games and art" discourse.

The idea behind *FYIA* is to get players to bullshit about whether certain hypothetical games could be considered "Art." The game comes with a stack of cards, each one with a satirical, intentionally over-the-top idea for an "artsy" game.[9] Each turn, one player flips over the top card then makes the case for why the game described would qualify as "Art" (or "good art"). Meanwhile, the first player to slap the table nominates themselves to argue the "con" position. Both parties argue their position, then the rest of the players vote one of three options: "yes, it's Art," "no, it's not Art," or "fuck you, it's Art!" The player who presented the winning position scores points, as do all the players who voted on the winning side. The "fuck you, it's Art!" vote serves as a risky "yes" vote that scores double points if the majority voted "no, it's not Art." The narrative is that only you, an iconoclast, truly "get it."

FYIA is not as radically ambiguous as *CBCG*. In some respects, the underlying system is a well-formed voting game, with a specified number of points awarded via a delineated list of possible voting outcomes. However, like *CBCG*, the game was designed to encourage performance over (or at least in addition to) strategy. The hope was to blur the boundary between game interaction and "real-world" interaction – and, more importantly, *to draw the players' attention to that blurriness*. Like *CBCG*, *FYIA* is a simplistic game system that would be dull on its own, without clever argumentation and theatrical performances. Phrased differently, it's difficult to imagine a World *FYIA* Championship.[10]

[9] Some example ideas we used included: "World of Sappho MMOG where there are intentional lacunae in the code," "A game where the enemies are Wikipedia articles and when you kill them it defaces the articles in real life," and "A computer game that simulates a tree falling when no one is around. There is no visual/audio feedback."

[10] Henning Eichberg (2010), writing about awkward folk games such as the traditional Inuit game of Mouth Pull, makes a similar quip: "An 'International Mouth Pull Federation would sound strange" (p.187). The point here is that deliberately silly and open-ended games are approached differently than traditionally competitive games and sports.

Figure 4 – *FYIA* at IndieCade 2009, played outside the hotel bar. (Photo courtesy Broken Rules / Flickr).

Dan, John, and I ran the game late Saturday evening, in the patio of a bar next to the conference headquarters.[11] This decision was largely the result of happenstance – it was the only time period we identified as a possible candidate for attracting enough people and generating enough buzz. We ended up running six games. The number of players ranged from seven to nine players, and varied from game to game. The group size also varied during the games, as players sometimes joined in late.

It is clear to me that *FYIA* was considerably more successful than *CBCG*. By "successful" I mean that the game generated more buzz and made more of an impact. As I will further discuss below, *FYIA* became a *spectacle*. Not only did the game attract more players than *CBCG* did, but it attracted far more onlookers. Players gravitated to the game without us having to "recruit," and many players stuck around to play multiple games. I even received two emails *after* the conference, thanking me for the evening and asking for a copy of the rules. To this day, I occasionally receive emails inquiring about the game.

[11] Three of the first four games featured one female player (a different female each time), and the other game consisted of only males. Following a short break, we managed to find a new group of people to play two additional games with us. This second group of players included two of the conference organizers and several conference speakers. I managed to record four of the six games on audio tape, and also jotted down some brief reflections the following day. After returning to Copenhagen, I prepared partial transcripts and wrote a preliminary report based on my observations and experiences.

In short, the game seemed to fulfill Gaver et al.'s criteria of *engagement* and *accommodation*. Players engaged with the game on their own accord, and many stayed for multiple games. The game became woven into the social tapestry of the evening and continued to generate interest after the conference itself. *FYIA* also seemed to satisfy Gaver et al.'s criterion of *reference*. Several players, for example, mentioned the famous boardgame *Apples to Apples* (1999) as a reference point.[12]

As we had hoped, the title of the game successfully hinted at how it might be played. The inherent profanity of the game was infectious, and by the end of the third game, several players were cursing up a storm. In one particularly humorous moment, one player yelled at the top of his lungs, to a reaction of raucous laughter: "That is not fucking art!! Go the fuck back to school, you don't know shit about art!!" Undoubtedly, profanity played a key role in making *FYIA* so successful a public spectacle. Profanity even became a site for memorable gameplay. One player, for example, drew laughs by using the same phrase again and again: "For fucking Christ sake, that shit ain't art!" Others player explicitly complimented him on his comedic timing. He successfully used profanity to make a reputation for himself.

Figure 5 – *FYIA* at IndieCade 2009, towards the end of the night. (Photo courtesy IndieCade / Flickr).

[12] Ironically, *Apples to Apples* is a game that we referenced explicitly in our public abstract for *CBCG*. Yet it was mentioned more frequently by our *FYIA* players.

The nature of the game's central voting mechanic made it difficult to play "strategically." *FYIA* tasks players with predicting how the other players will vote, but in practice this is not easy to do. Perhaps because it was difficult to strategize, votes tended to swing towards players who made particularly compelling or theatrical presentations. One memorable example of this was a unanimous "yes" vote for one player who made an unexpectedly perverted but clever argument about a fictional hairstyling game. Clearly, the players felt compelled to reward the strength and creativity of her presentation. To celebrate the occasion, we improvised a rule that stated that a prompt card would be ripped up and replaced in the case of a unanimous vote. After all, we had decided once and for all that the idea on the card was indeed "Art." The presenter won the honor of brainstorming the replacement idea, and then adding it to the deck.

FYIA, like *CBCG*, was designed to make players debate issues in which they were (at least somewhat) personally invested. The problem with *CBCG*, however, had been that players didn't always know the people on each other's business cards, or even on the demo cards; even if the players themselves had the requisite knowledge, casual spectators might not. *FYIA*, by comparison, opened up discussions that almost anyone could join – at least anyone attending IndieCade. Players could (and often did) play off their own art historical and game cultural knowledge, but the game required only a basic interest in games and/or art. Any other salient information was, for the most part, contained within the idea cards.

If anything, *FYIA* actually *encouraged* art theory ignorance, feigned or real. The game's title itself suggests a populist attitude critical of art world jargon and elitism. In some of the more raucous games, players adopted a self-ironically saucy attitude. Some players, taking their cue from daytime talk shows, would comment on a particularly compelling argument by reacting with overly dramatic "ooohh!" exclamations. Faux-intellectual sound bites often earned the most favorable crowd reactions. Any kind of overly serious art theoretical discourse would have ran counter to the spirit of the gameplay.

It is important to note that this "spirit" was not entirely determined by the game design itself, but was also shaped and enforced by emergent social customs. In the very first game, for instance, differing player expectations led to palpable tension. Two players – lecturers who have a background in art history – expressed skepticism about how the other players were approaching the game. On his first turn, one of the two lecturers asked the crowd, "So I have to say why this is 'Art'?" to which the other players chimed in with some light-hearted suggestions. One player recommended: "You have to say… that it's a metaphor for our society!" Another exclaimed, laughing while he spoke: "it's about the fragility of the human condition!" The lecturer, however, responded in a sour tone: "[that] does not make it 'Art'." The tension point was that the lecturers were focusing on whether or not the game ideas could indeed be called "Art," whereas the other players were more invested in satire than in making serious arguments.

One way to understand this conflict is as a meta-level negotiation over how to play the game. The debates that emerged were not only about whether or not certain ideas were "Art," but also about how to even interpret and play with such a prompt. In short, the nature of the game itself was highly dependent on the social makeup of the people playing. Seen in that light, a game like *FYIA* can be understood as a convenient "alibi" for making silly and creative performances in front of one's colleagues and friends (Wilson, forthcoming).

Between **Game System and Social Context**

Evaluating *FYIA* against *CBCG*, we again face the same tricky question: to what extent should success or failure be attributed to the designed game system itself? If such open-ended game experiences are so dependent on the players and the context, how much does the design even matter?

Even in games like *CBCG* or *FYIA*, the designed rules (as explained to the players at the beginning of the game) and the game pieces certainly play an essential role in shaping the overall experience. Perhaps most significantly, *FYIA* turned out to be a simpler, less intimidating game. In boardgaming terms, it features less "buy-in." It was easier for us to recruit players because the flow of the gameplay is clear: bicker about art, then vote. By contrast, neither version of *CBCG* was quite as self-evident. *CBCG* also *appears* more complex, with cards scattered over the table and in the players' hands.

This property of "self-evidency" – of how the game both looks and plays – is a key concern when designing games oriented towards public performance. Games like *CBCG* and *FYIA*, and also *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *J.S. Joust* (as described above), demand a group of players who can impart the right ethos. All four games are likely to fall flat if the players aren't willing to perform theatrically or adopt a self-ironic attitude. The difference between *CBCG* and the other three games is that *FYIA*, *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, and *J.S. Joust* seem to be more self-sustaining. As long as those games are seeded with sufficient energy and enthusiasm, they are simple enough to run themselves, feeding on their own momentum.

As such, both case studies described in this chapter demonstrate that these kinds of games are very sensitive to context. Success or failure is often determined by where, when, and how one deploys the game. In our case, *FYIA* benefited from better-timed marketing. *CBCG* was officially announced in the conference program, but that advertisement lacked immediacy. By contrast, I was able to announce *FYIA* immediately after the Saturday evening keynote. I was able to tell a captive audience that we were heading to the hotel bar to run a brand new game. Importantly, this spoken announcement allowed me to convey the right tone and attitude. In turn, that grassroots vibe gave the game valuable social legitimacy.

This primacy of social context became even clearer to me after I tried running *FYIA* a second time, in January of 2010 at a small game studies seminar at IT University of Copenhagen. Simply put, the game flopped. At IndieCade, *FYIA* had successfully captured the zeitgeist of the moment. The issue of art and games, a notorious debate within the broader gaming community, seemed to haunt that conference. But in a quiet university setting, without those stakes and without alcohol, the game felt awkwardly forced.

The shortcoming of this analysis, however, is that it treats content and context as two separate concerns. Arguably, this kind of thinking is what led us into trouble when designing *CBCG*. Preparing for SIGGRAPH and IndieCade, we had carefully designed a game that we could then deploy in a conference setting. Yet our meticulous pre-planning failed to adequately account for the particularities of each conference's social landscape. In retrospect, we focused too much on how players would "appropriate" an existing context and not enough on how they might *change* that context and create their own. As interaction design theoretician Paul Dourish (2001, 2004) might put it, we had made the mistake of conceptualizing the game as something "within" and the context as something "without." Critiquing the ubiquitous computing literature, Dourish usefully reminds us that "Context isn't just 'there,' but is actively produced, maintained and enacted in the course of the activity at hand" (2004, p.22). In other words, context is not something stable or given, but instead arises out of interaction. Context is *achieved* – "an outcome, rather than a premise" (p.22). As sociological work on situated action has argued, the trick is to look *between* the designed system and the environment (Nardi, 1995; Suchman, 2007).

This wisdom can also be usefully appropriated as a design ethos. When designing games intended to foster social interaction and public performance, it is productive to consider how players might *transform* context, tailoring social environment to their own ends. Drawing from my experiences running *CBCG* and *FYIA*, I identify two particular considerations: *spectacle* and *subversiveness*.

Creating spectacle is an especially useful strategy when designing a game for a busy public setting. Conferences in particular are notoriously hectic. Attendees typically use downtime to talk and network with one another. As such, successful conference games not only need to support that social interchange,

but they also need to stand out and draw in participants. The key is to empower the players to create the spectacle themselves, transforming the public setting into something palpably different.

This notion of the spectacle is doubly useful because it implies the presence of *spectators*. For any game that aims to encourage public performance, it is essential that players have an audience they can *perform to*. Sometimes, it isn't sufficient that the game is fun for the players; it also has to be fun and intelligible for the audience. As Dalsgaard and Hansen (2008) argue, embodied interaction encompasses more than just the "user-system relationship" as typically theorized in the HCI literature: "Participating in an interactive experience – and especially when it comes to experiences happening in public space – is also about how what you do is experienced by someone else, and of how you know that other people are seeing and experiencing that you are experiencing something" (p.2). In other words, it is productive to conceptualize players as "performers" – performers who are keenly aware that they are beholden not only to the demands of the game, but also to the expectations of the audience.

Reflecting back on my experiences running *CBCG*, it is precisely this element of spectacle that the game failed to generate. We had hoped that the game would open up loud debates and amusing arguments, but the reality was that the subject matter was often too unfocused to readily lead to "juicy" conversations. Another problem was that rounds of *CBCG* appeared rather ordinary. Sitting at a table, huddled over a mess of business cards, players blended in with all the other tables of conference attendees. Too fixated on the game system itself, we designers had lost sight of how the game would look.

By contrast, *FYIA*, *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, and *J.S. Joust* all thrive on the spectacular. In *J.S. Joust*, players are eager to toy around with the PlayStation Move controllers, regardless of the particulars of the game rules. As I argue in Chapter 4, the colored light orb of the Move controller plays a key role in drawing a crowd. *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, despite its digital underpinnings, creates a spectacle of wacky physical actions that happen off the screen, away from the computer. *FYIA* primarily uses sound to generate attention. The profanity and confrontational nature of the game's very title strongly suggests loud and theatrically combative gameplay. Crucially, all three of these games are more than simply "self-evident." They actively scream out (figuratively or literally), demanding attention.

Related to this notion of the spectacle is that of subversive play. Thinking again about the "betweenness" of embodied interaction, subversiveness is a usefully evocative concept because it implies a kind of transformation – a playful hijacking of the mundane or familiar, towards one's own ends. In *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, subversiveness is introduced at several different levels. First, the game deliberately takes a more ambivalent and satirical stance towards game technology. Wrestling over the controllers just isn't what you typically *do* when playing videogames. Second, the game tries to "deputize" the players to cheat and otherwise improvise on the prescribed rules (Wilson, 2011). The fun of *B.U.T.T.O.N.* arises precisely from this emergent play *around* the game, rather than from the simplistic system we designers provide.

Certainly, subversiveness was something we strived for when designing *CBCG*. The hope was we could take the practice of exchanging business cards and lampoon it via a game. The problem, however, was that we had chosen a practice that may not have been worth lampooning. Most of the conference attendees just didn't seem so invested in the whole reality of business cards. The lesson is that subversion demands an adequate substrate on which to operate. The stakes need to be sufficiently high. After all, the very idea of "transgression" implies some emotional investment in the boundary being exceeded.

Figure 6 – *J.S. Joust*, on the streets of Copenhagen in 2011. (Footage courtesy Johan Bichel Lindegaard).

FYIA, by contrast, felt palpably transgressive. First, the fashion in which we had improvised and announced the game made it seem less stilted and less "official." Second, in tackling the topic of art and games, we had hit on a certain zeitgeist of the conference. Many conference attendees had strong thoughts on the issue, and so the game provided a welcome opportunity to vent those opinions in a playful manner. Finally and perhaps most importantly, cussing and yelling loudly at one another in public plays with the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. In some sense, *FYIA* is less a game where players get to use profane language, and more a thinly veiled excuse to use that language in public.

Though cussing and arguing at a bar certainly does not seem so "dangerous," it does feel somewhat edgy or *risky*. Drawing from Richard Schechner's (1988) work on performance and play, we might identify *FYIA* as a good example of "dark play," in which "actions continue even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused" (p.5). To be clear, dark play is difficult to control, and can easily result in unpleasant and unintended situations. But this inherently *provisional* nature of dark play is precisely its very appeal. As I have argued elsewhere, game that offload the responsibility of "safety" onto the human players themselves can feel empowering (Wilson, 2011). As Schechner argues, the art of performance thrives on intentional destabilization, where players are forced to invent "new ways of balancing" (p.3). Performance-oriented play, in that view, is a "continuous creative-destruction process" (p.3), subverting and transforming existing situations in order to generate new ones.[13]

[13] In writing about dark play, Schechner is less interested in communal festivity than he is in the private experience of such subversion: "Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification" (p.13). However, I still believe that these kinds of unstable, broken games can indeed foster a kind festive togetherness. Contrary to Schechner's suggestion, the idea of communal festivity need not imply a clean kind of "resolution" or "integration." On this point, I am inspired by agonist political philosophy, which argues that opposing viewpoints in a democracy can never be entirely reconciled, only properly managed (see Mouffe, 2005).

Conclusion

In this article, I examined two deliberately open-ended, non-digital conference games that I ran in 2009. Beyond the games themselves, I addressed the broader questions of how one might go about evaluating such games, and whether success or failure should be attributed to content or to context. Drawing from work on embodied interaction, I argued that game designers might productively think about the relation *between* content and context. I identified two particularly evocative considerations when designing for public performance: spectacle and subversiveness.

Dourish, critiquing the notion that context is something predefined, urges designers to "support the process by which context is continually manifest, defined, negotiated, and shared" (2004, p.26). In designing *CBCG*, we had focused on how the *game* itself might be negotiated. But we had failed to seriously think through the issue of what it might mean for players to transform their surrounding social *environment*. Our fundamental premise – that conference attendees would care about collecting and gossiping about business cards – turned out to be decidedly naive. The game's open-endedness was ultimately too confined to the frame of a niche game that we had designed well before the conference.

In designing *FYIA*, by contrast, we succeeded in latching onto an issue about which conference attendees actually cared. The takeaway lesson here is that successful conference games (and other games geared towards public performance) aren't just "games" per se, but also burgeoning *cultural memes*. To play *FYIA* at IndieCade 2009, for instance, was to participate in the very genesis of a brand new social practice. My own observation is that such a feeling of *contribution* provides a powerful motivator for the kinds of theatrical performances upon which these games thrive.

A related insight is that these types of deliberately open-ended games and their players do need some sort of "substrate" on which to operate. The kind of performance-oriented gameplay I write about above doesn't just appear out of thin air; it requires a semi-coherent "excuse" or common ground that ties the players (and spectators) together. Running *FYIA* at IndieCade, we were able to establish such a commonality both physically and socially – *physically*, in that the game used a spectacle of loud profanities to attract players to the same makeshift arena, and *socially*, in that the game leveraged a very specific issue on which many conference attendees had strong opinions. Of course, the very point of games like *FYIA* is to strengthen that common ground, but they do need an initial springboard.

As Schechner puts it: "we need to stop looking so hard at play, or play genres, and investigate *playing*, the ongoing underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming" (p.18, emphasis his). The hope, as I have tried to express here, is that we might design to encourage this kind of reconfiguration – if only we recognize that players might reconfigure more than just the game, but also the very underpinnings of their social realities.

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- Afterward -

Afterward

"The art of politics teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant [...] as long as the polis is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes, everything is lost."

-- Hannah Arendt (1958, p.206)

*"With no screens, no board, and **only one rule**,* Johann Sebastian Joust *managed to make a crowd explode for a random nerd like me."*

-- Nick Suttner (2011, emphasis mine)

It's a clear Saturday evening in Culver City, Los Angeles. Together with an assorted crowd of indie game aficionados, I am watching *Johann Sebastian Joust* being played in the middle of a parking lot, at the 2011 IndieCade festival. Somewhat predictably, the spectators have formed themselves into a large circular arena. In the middle of the circle, my friend Nick squares off against an unfamiliar adversary. At first there were seven players; by now, the players have been whittled down to the final two. Controllers in hand, Nick and his opponent slowly circle one another. Cautiously, they stand a good distance apart.

Discretely, and without his opponent or most of the spectators even noticing, Nick uses his right foot to partially pull his left shoe off of his heel. Suddenly and without warning, Nick flings the shoe off the tip of his foot. To everyone's amazement, the shoe finds it precise target, hitting Nick's adversary exactly on the controller-holding arm. Jostled backwards, the controller flashes red, and the adversary is defeated. Much like Sidsel's kick at the Nordic Game Jam (see Chapter 4), Nick's maneuver is immediately legitimized by the spectators' roaring approval. As Nick (2011) tells the story: "The crowd exploded in cheers and applause, as I instinctively set the Move down on the cement and lifted both fists to the sky in triumph." His opponent, meanwhile, disgustedly throws the shoe back towards Nick and storms away.

I end with this anecdote because it nicely illustrates a few key themes of this dissertation. First, Nick's victory foregrounds the fact that *J.S. Joust* isn't just a game, but also a *performance*. Though one could reasonably claim the same about any game, the difference here is that a game like *J.S. Joust* tries to smear this consideration in the players' faces, calling our attention to the *event* that resides around and beyond the procedural system. The pleasures of the game are anchored around the transgression of aggressive physical contact, moving in slow motion, and playing to spectatorship. It is not a game that can be played alone. It thrives in festive settings, and requires that its players be in the right mood. Nick's shining moment cannot solely be attributed to the game itself, but is also very much a product of good timing and social context. Feeding off the energy of an interested audience, as well as the buzz the game had already received throughout the festival, the Saturday evening event proved to be a perfect setting.

Yet context does not provide the whole picture here. As I argue in Chapter 5, we should look to the relationship *between* system and context. On this point, Nick's claim that the game has "only one rule" speaks volumes. Arguably, the claim is technically inaccurate (though it depends on how we define "rule"). The algorithm that defines what it means to move "too fast" is not so straightforward. Moreover, the game is clearly also bounded by *social* rules, even if those rules are constantly in flux. Nevertheless, the point here is that Nick *conceptualizes* the game in terms of one directive – don't move your controller too fast. As such, *J.S. Joust* provides one easy "hook" that players and spectators can latch onto. This simplicity gives us more space to think about performance. And because it's relatively easy to understand

how the game works (at least at its most basic), the game readily provides a visible *spectacle*. In turn, that spectacle helps empower a player like Nick to create a spectacle of his own making.

Nick's identification of "only one rule" also speaks to the deliberately open-ended nature of the game's design. As I argue in Chapter 4, a game like *J.S. Joust* can productively be understood as a kind of toy around which we designers have suggested one possible game. Those rules, of course, are open to negotiation and social custom. There's no reason why players should necessarily start standing in a circle, or why they can't play with the controllers in their pocket. Nick's shoe-throw stands as a perfect example of the type of improvisation encouraged by such an open-ended system. Here, the idea is that different groups and players come to the game with different needs and desires. Though *all* games – even the most traditional computer games – allow for negotiation about how the game is played, *J.S. Joust* hopes to sell its players on the idea that there is a certain *pleasure* in that disputation.

Figure 1 – *Johann Sebastian Joust* at GameCity, 2011. (Photo via GameCity).

Furthermore, the resigned disgust of Nick's opponent reminds us that this moment is not some achievement of perfect, utopian togetherness. The victory came at the cost of a clear loser, ambushed by Nick's somewhat transgressive shoe-throw. At the very least, this moment begs the question of what kind of play is *too* physical. To offer a contrasting an example, I have witnessed other games in which one player ended up mistakenly hitting another in the face with such a move. In short, such a maneuver comes with real risks. Yet as I argue in Chapter 3, these contingencies are precisely what make a victory like Nick's so memorable. As Hannah Arendt (1958) writes: "The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes

in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the 'easy life of the gods' would be a lifeless life" (p.120). In this view, we might argue that Nick's shoe-throw qualifies as a calculated risk. Understood as an exemplar of Arendtian action (as discussed in the Introduction), his maneuver speaks to a new beginning – one whose consequences were unpredictable.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should recognize that Nick's victory itself only tells part of the story. His triumph also resides in successfully bending the rules, and in selling the crowd on that feat. Such an aggressive maneuver might have scared off other, more timid players, but it might also have inspired some of his peers, too. The crucial insight here is that Nick had influenced the very way the game would continue to be played, both for better and for worse. The hope is that a game like *J.S. Joust* might help foreground these tensions, encouraging players that they might *embrace* disputation as something to be savored. The key is to recognize that in performing against one another, we might ultimately be performing together *with* each other as well.

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