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The Playful Turn and Critical Play

ABSTRACT
This article examines the playful turn during the last decade and a half of game studies in relation to the idea of critical play. It analyzes critical play broadly, as a design paradigm, as a form of play that is critical and subversive, and as a shorthand for work that is critical of play. Thus, the article traces two general tendencies within the emergence of critical play that advocate for play as a form of critique and work that critiques play. In doing so, we highlight the ways that game studies scholarship has understood and extended the idea of critical play while locating understudied avenues for exploring critical play in the future. We argue that the provocative and paradoxical formation of "critical play" establishes a productive tension between its terms, allowing play to revitalize criticality while critique can operate to remove the excesses of play within the contemporary period.

KEYWORDS: Play; Ludification; Critical Play; Critical Game Studies; Critique; Videogame Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The inaugural issue of *G|A|M|E: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* was entitled, "Players, all of us", and commenced with an essay "Homo Ludicus. The ubiquity of play and its role in present society" by Peppino Ortoleva (2012). For Ortoleva (2012), play increasingly enters "into areas of common living where its presence would have been deemed as irreverent or misplaced until a few years ago, from mourning to war, from management to science". Ortoleva argues that a "paradigm of playfulness" has emerged, naming it a "new ludic system", and explaining that one goal of the 21st century should be to describe different experiences and principles of play to understand how humans will inhabit and reconfigure this new world. This paradigm of playfulness is one expression of a playful turn in game studies, a turn that emerged after the first decade of academic game studies that focused on formally defining games and their specific properties.

Similar to Ortoleva's paradigm of playfulness, Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens (2013) announce the rise of play and playfulness as concepts and experiences increasingly permeating life in the 21st century—the "ludic cen-

tury" as it has been called (Zimmerman, 2014). Their chapter, "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity", begins with a playful turn: "A spectre is haunting the world—the spectre of playfulness. We are witnessing a global 'ludification of culture'" (p. 75).[1] While performed as a rhetorical gesture, invoking Karl Marx's famous opening to "The Communist Manifesto" aligns playfulness with communism's struggle, implicitly suggesting that play is the enemy of some (attacked by the unplayful powers of a rational, serious, and technocratic culture) but also a radical, liberating force that can reshape culture entirely. A year after "Homo Ludens 2.0" appeared, Miquel Sicart (2014) invoked the liberating powers of play and playfulness in *Play Matters*, , explicitly framing the book's paean to play "as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism" (p. 5). Thus, play was cast as a vehicle for social, cultural, and political critique and a way to activate criticality by usurping and resisting dominant traditions and stale worldviews (of course, with a little flare, fun, and frivolity to boot). If play is "free within the limits set by the rules" as described by Roger Caillois (1961), then the turn to play in game studies enacted a breaking free, as if game scholars' focus on the formal aspects of games and their rules could no longer contain the freedom of play (p. 8).

Playful turns such as the ludification of culture and the paradigm of playfulness can appear to be objective, as diagnosing the growing significance of play which calls for further analysis. Yet, they also contain an air of jubilant excitement, identifying play as a transformative force permeating reality and ushering in a century of playful disruptions. While gamification—or turning life into a game—has been critiqued as bullshit, playfulness or the playification of reality is celebrated, to wit, as "the shit." In a prescient article "A Critique of Play", media theorist Sean Cubitt (2009) wrote, "The predilection of postmodernism for play in all its guises is inadequately critical." Through the lens of the culture industries and consumer capitalism (including the videogame industries) Cubitt theorized play as a quintessential ideological form, powerful because it invokes innocence, childhood, purity, and thus can operate as a "royal instantiation of good". That is, play and playfulness become codewords for what is good, positive, pure, subversive, creative, innovative, and so forth. We share Cubitt's suspicions concerning play, arguing that game studies' predilection for play should become robustly critical.

A decade beyond the ludic turn in game studies, attaching the grand promises of the ludification of culture to a radical transformation of culture seems increasingly untenable given the pandemic, entrenchment of authoritarianism, proliferation of white supremacy and homophobia, and the annihilating force of war—all of which reveal, in different ways, the painful persistence of domination and oppressive structures despite the carnivalesque dreams of playful subversion. Indeed, the 21st century seems anything but playful. At this moment, we need further critiques of play which would refuse to imagine a pure, liberated play, opting instead to link play to a perpetual process of critical examina-

1. The ludic turn—the name of a section of the book in which their essay appeared—marks the ascendency of play as an analytic subject in game studies as well as a transformation of culture (Raessens, 2014). The term "ludification of culture" first appeared in an article by Raessens (2006) though it was undeveloped at the time, indicating that a more robust turn to play occurred a few years later (p. 53).

tion. It is urgent to understand the limits of play, to critique play's mobilization for oppression and commodification, and to challenge play as an inexhaustible, malleable resource or ontological force at the command of human agents or naturally expressive in material culture. There's a need to overcome play's innocence and neutrality, bracketed from power and ideology, and instead to see the "spectre of playfulness" as manifesting a site of ongoing critical struggle.

Such a struggle is not new, and in the last decade and half, a body of scholarship has emerged that investigates the intersections of criticality and play that seeks to understand play's possibilities and limits. In this article, we trace ways that game studies scholars have combined the critical and play, have leveraged play and playfulness as forms of criticality, or have been critical of play itself. This mapping is not intended to be exhaustive, but we seek to critique forms of play's appropriation while diagnosing possibilities for further exploration. Ultimately, we argue that even critical play itself is "inadequately critical" (as Cubitt said of postmodernism's proclivity for play), and thus we aim to renew emphasis on the critical side of critical play.

2. CRITICAL PLAY

Mary Flanagan's (2009) *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* joined criticality with play to create a productive tension between two words that, understood colloquially, appear as polar opposites—play invoking frivolity and whimsy with criticality suggesting serious reflection, judgment and discernment. Critical play brought the academically valorized practices of critical thinking and critique into the orbit of play. Precursors were focused primarily on games, such as serious games that cultivated critical reflection and social awareness, countergaming practices (Galloway, 2005) aimed at critiquing mainstream game forms, and educational theory intrigued by videogames' production of critical thinking through problem solving. For example, games and learning scholar James Paul Gee (2003) wondered if videogames could "lead to critique, innovation, and good or valued thinking and asking in society?" (p. 46). Flanagan's work—along with others, such as Lindsay Grace's (2010) critical gameplay project—extended these traditions while entangling play more closely with critical practice.

Critical play can be understood broadly in two ways, as a form of critically-inflected play and as a design methodology which is "focused on creating a critique through game designs" (Grace, 2020, p. 47). As a methodology, designers seek to inscribe criticality within the design process and develop games "that instill the ability to think critically during and after play" (Flanagan, 2009, p. 261). Drawing on a tradition of avant-garde experimentation in art and media, critical play designers offer alternative games that seek to critique the status quo, induce radical change within everyday life, and embed social values within the play process (Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2016). Flanagan (2009) explains that "the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person's interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase

change" (p. 261). Thus, play becomes an instrument for the delivery and exploration of social critique—similar to how performance art, avant-garde films, and documentaries seek social commentary and change within their own mediums.

However, when Flanagan (2009) mentions that the critical play approach seeks "to make compelling, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking to offer novel possibilities in games", these intricacies tantalize but are left unexplained (p. 6). The key point is to make room for reflection, to embed social values within design and play processes (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016), not to explain how criticality and play interrelate. When Ragnhild Tronstad (2010) reviewed *Critical Play*, she wrote that Flanagan "doesn't address the apparent paradox in the concept 'critical play,' or how these two terms, put together like this, must necessarily influence each other. What happens to play when it becomes critical? And how might critical content be influenced by play?" The "paradox" emerges because criticality can invoke seriousness and determined thinking, while play suggests frivolous fun and pleasure without the interruptions of criticality. Play is understood as subjective, absorbing, and engaging while criticality is objective, distant, contemplative and reflective. When combined, how would these interact? At the end of *Critical Play*, Flanagan (2009) mentions "shifts in play" generated by critical play design but does not develop them (p. 260). However, Flanagan invokes the immersive and safety principles of play to explain why critical thinking within videogames might be effective. "Play offers a way to capture player interest without sacrificing the process of thinking through problems that are organized subjectively," Flanagan wrote, suggesting that play could engage without interrupting critical thinking (p. 261). Flanagan also indicated that "Play is, by definition, a safety space", suggesting that players can explore difficult social issues without risk (p. 261). These typical definitions of play—as absorbing and safe—cast play as assuaging medicine that eases the player's healthy intake of critical content.

In this scenario, where play becomes a vehicle for critique, one worry is that play's absorbing properties do not engage players more deeply with critical content but negate critical reflection. As Rilla Khaled (2018) explains, "Within mainstream entertainment games, immersion has been embraced to the detriment of reflection, serving almost as its antithesis" (p. 19). Echoing this, especially when political content is involved, game scholar and artist Anne-Marie Schleiner (2017) worries that "the player's critical and reflective capacity, political or otherwise, is easily bespelled amidst the movement of game actions" (pp. 74-75). Given such concerns, Sicart (2013) has argued that slowness in games can foreground "reflection against the pressure of function, efficiency, and speed" (pp. 72–73), or Brain Upton (2015) has noted that designers must embed time for reflection in gameplay so players can comprehend narratives or perform other mental labor. Perhaps most significantly, Khaled (2018) has theorized an approach called "reflective game design", examining how play can "trigger critical reflection" and arguing that "surprise, player unfriendliness,

ambiguity and multiple interpretations can push players toward reflecting on their play experiences" (p. 20). Khaled's work deepens understanding of how play can trigger reflection in relation to play. For example, Khaled's arguments that critical reflection is about questions not answers, ambiguity not solutions, aligns reflection with play and playfulness, where "to be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity" (Sicart, 2014, p 28). That is, if game designers incorporate ambiguity and possibilities for playfulness then such games might not negate reflection but encourage it.

Research over the last decade surrounding critical play and reflection has been robust and innovative, however we argue that research must continue to explore how play and critically influence each other.[2] Both critical reflection and play are wide ranging activities with a wealth of affective and phenomenological overlap and difference. For example, critical reflection embraces suspicion and doubt, suspends judgment, weighs arguments, and gains distance from experience to contemplate alternative solutions to a problem. Play also seeks alternatives but is characterized as engagement, curiosity, whimsy, fancy, mimicry and a whole host of actions and thoughts that do not necessarily dovetail with the affective qualities of a critical (not playful) mindset. Play liberates, imagining possibilities and testing them playfully while critical reflection deliberates, sifting through possibilities to judge or select actions according to criteria. Ascertaining similarities and differences, synergies and repulsions, between criticality and play—perhaps through a deeper engagement with play studies (Henricks, 2020)—will deepen understanding of when play and criticality align or are at odds.

Beyond comparing play and criticality, focus on the mutations of critical reflection within critical play is also urgent. Simply studying how play can trigger reflection or make room for it suggests that play is a tool to nudge critical thinking, operating within the same framework that caused Gee (2003) to wonder if games could lead to critique. Instead we must understand how play situations generate their own forms of reflective engagement and thought. For example, Patrick Jagoda (2020) discusses games as an unique sensorium which couples affect and rationality, catalyzing new forms of reflective engagement. "Thought during gameplay is shaped by speed," Jagoda argues, but instead of simply turning to slowness to inject critical reflection within play, Jagoda acknowledges that speed in gameplay transforms thought as an affective experience (p. 94). Similarly, Rainforest Scully-Blaker (2020) theorizes moments of stasis and stillness in games but refigures them in terms of velocities and player emotions that modulate reflection. Thus, when Scully-Blaker asks, "can play be a critical act?" (p. 3), play does not trigger criticality but enacts new forms of it: stasis and stillness are pauses that open space for reflection but also suggest new affective and phenomenological ways of thinking about reflection. Simply put, we argue that game studies scholars should seek new theories of criticality that arise from the particular sensorium of games and play instead of treating them as vehicles for already known and inherited forms of social criticism and critique.

2. Scholarship has broadened the study of critical play and reflection. For example, Grace (2014) differentiates between "social critiques" which point outward, challenging larger cultural and political norms and "mechanical critiques" that point inward toward subverting conventional game forms, also called "reflective" or "recursive" play (p. 5). Jess Marcotte and Rilla Khaled (2017) studied the practices of critical game designers themselves, interviewing them about their design processes and how they approach critical game design and reflection. *G|A|M|E* released a special issue about self-reflexive, critical games while theorizing and publishing games intended as research and "playable critique" (Barr, 2016; Caruso et al., 2016; Gualeni, 2016). Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2020) linked formal analyses of game systems and logics to understanding the reflective impacts of critical play. Using queer theory as a critical guide, scholars have discussed queering play and game mechanics to critique normative forms of play and design (Chang, 2017; Marcotte, 2018; Ruberg, 2020). Moving in a different direction, Brock (2017) theorizes forms of "self-reflexivity" not "reflection," making us aware that games already create constant self-consciousness related to performance and one's individual and social reality beyond the game.

This point harbors a deeper lesson: game studies research can appear uncritical in terms of criticality itself—overlooking criticisms of critique itself as being politically ineffectual or privileging a dominant subject position of mastery. In contrast, Paolo Ruffino (2018) advocates for what he calls "Creative Game Studies," an embedded form of research and writing which "strives to be inventive, critical and performative" by intervening directly in game culture as a participant—thus sacrificing the mastery of critical distance to create new forms of entangled knowledge. Indeed, play as a form of action within a system might provide a means to critique the mastery and privilege associated with critical distance while striving to produce new critical experiments. Bruno Latour (2004), for example, argued that critique has become ineffectual, turning instead to a definition of "critical" from science describing when an event reaches an intensity which causes a radical transition in form. What if games embodied this idea of criticality instead of criticality as reflection?[3]

Ultimately, the idea of "critical play" suggests that the critical is a known entity and that designers innately know what critique is, when instead, critical reflection about the critical itself is necessary. While critical play designers and scholars can become enamored with play's potential to trigger critical reflection, we argue that they need to be aware of the histories and futures of criticality and critique. Marcotte and Khaled (2017) provide an instructive point that "The boundaries of what is *critical* are in constant flux and today's critical design might become the status quo tomorrow" (p. 199). For example, long ago media theorist Lev Manovich argued that videogame players seamlessly move between absorbed states of action and moments of interruption where they scan information on feedback systems, adjust control panels, and pause to strategize (2001, p. 209). Manovich argues that processes of interruption have been absorbed into gameplay. Disrupting player experiences to produce reflection is an outdated strategy because the oscillation between immersion and interruption is a new ideological paradigm which Manovich calls metarealism. Disrupting immersion is the new immersion. Indeed, as Jay Bolter (2019) has shown, "reflection" is now a mainstream media aesthetic—not a critical gesture. If metarealism operates as an ideological norm in ludic culture, breaking this dominant norm requires different theories and design strategies. This aligns with the urgent need to rethink the "critical" of critical play.

3. PLAY AS CRITICALITY

Beyond referring to a design approach that uses play as a vehicle for critique, critical play can also identify a *mode* of play guided by critical awareness or the idea that play is a subversive, critical force in itself. In terms of the former approach, Flanagan (2009) theorized the idea of "unplaying" as a modality of play which reverses dominant forms of "expected play" ingrained within social norms; for example, instead of playing with a doll through conventional forms of care-giving a player might dismantle the doll as an inversion of expected

3. When discussing political play, Sicart (2015) pivots toward play as critical thinking in action, writing, "We need to understand play as an action and not a mode of reflection" (p. 2). Here, play as an activity aligns with the transformative potential of politics, where play as action becomes social critique in action, seeking critical mass and mobilizing change in real life (Flanagan, 2010).

play and gendered norms (p. 33). As Grace (2020) explains in relation to critical play, "Players are always free to engage in playing with a game contrary to its intended play" (p. 138). Such an idea has been generative, for example, when Soraya Murray (2018) draws on Flanagan's work to theorize games as "playable representations" and "playable visual culture" (p. 25). The "playable" indicates a modality of interaction—guided by critical awareness—that allows players to probe possibilities within games and thus their embedded politics, norms, and ideologies, even subverting them.

Seen in this way, critical play carries political connotations of subversive activity. Espen Aarseth's (2007) influential article "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player" signaled a shift from the formal study of games and their rules to that of play and players, doing so through the lens of play as a seditious force breaking free from the rigid "prison-house of regulated play" (p. 133). Sicart (2014) also frames play as critical and subversive, pointing out that "the critical nature of play has been widely explored" in the Marxist politics and playful theater of Augusto Boal and Paolo Friere, in political live action role-playing, in Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque, and in Situationist, Dada, and Fluxus art movements which Flanagan also investigates (p. 72). Drawing on these traditions, Sicart (2015) argues that political play puts critical thinking into action, leaning on an understanding of critical thinking as action and transformation. Since play and playfulness can appropriate contexts to disrupt, transform and reconfigure them, then play suddenly aligns with critique, which also seeks to understand, transform, and reconfigure dominant culture.

Yet, while play can be critical and subversive, it is not necessarily so. For some time, play has been recognized as a way to motivate and sustain political action while also providing imaginative exploration of alternatives to dominant culture (Hearn, 1976; Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). This exploration of possibilities explains how play's appropriative aspect can take over a context and reconfigure it, even subvert it. However, the appropriative properties of play might increase engagement with an activity in an apolitical manner. Thus, play can express players' freedom to explore possibilities within a context while operating as an apolitical subversion for subversion's sake. Thomas S. Henricks (2015) explains: "play's strength is its opening of possibilities, which people are free to gather on their own terms or to disregard entirely" (p. 225). One can play against dominant norms or play along with them. Players might seek to critique conventions or play against ideological content in a game, but they might simply seek independence from a system instead of resisting it intentionally.

Thus, we argue that for play to be critical, critical perspectives must guide play's ambivalent and agnostic powers of appropriation, engagement, and subversion. For example, Bo Ruberg's notion of "playing queer" deploys play as a means of deconstructing the hegemonic ideologies normatively at work in the videogame system from within the system itself, via the fluidifying force of playing in such a way that contradicts the value systems being reproduced.

Queerness, in Ruberg's (2019) concept of queer play, is a theoretical framework that enacts a transformative force upon the game system through playing "wrong", involving such strategies as "playing to lose, playing to hurt, to playing too fast or too slow." (p. 17-18). Ruberg specifically likens this form of queer play to a kind of transformative self-expression which is not dissimilar to Schleiner's (2017) concept of ludic mutation, where "The player's power lies in creation, change, and modification of a game" (p. 11). Key to these forms of subversion is the fact that criticality guides play, whether through critiques of normative culture in queer theory or more broadly through critiques of capitalism and social oppressions.

Ian Bogost (2016) disagrees with linking play to criticality and subversion, explaining that the danger is that "Play becomes a skill or literacy, akin to critical thinking or problem solving" (p. 101) which can cause play to lose its vibrant "diversity" and turn it into an instrumental activity or political ideology. Play as subversion becomes a "palliative to structure" in these situations (Bogost, 2016, p. 101), echoing ideas that play serves a compensatory function, figured today as escapism. Bogost is right that play's diversity expands far beyond its uses to invigorate politics, despite similarities that play and playfulness have with critical subversion. Nevertheless, discounting play's political uses and upholding its significance as autotelic (i.e. an end in itself) ontologizes play, essentializing it as a primordial activity. This results in an ideology of play against criticality—a point we critique in the following section.

In contrast to Bogost's dissatisfaction with play being mobilized for political purposes, some scholars, such as in Susanna Paasonen (2018), extends Sicart's notion of subversive critical play to its logical endpoint where play is not only a "palliative to structure" but an annihilator of structure, eroding all norms in a post-political utopia. In the realm of sexuality, Paasonen (2018) argues that "the concepts of play and playfulness can be used in eroding some of the tenacious norms and dualisms through which sexual lives continue to be labeled and understood—be these ones separating the straight from the queer, childhood from adulthood, normality from deviancy, work from play or fantasy from reality. It then follows that gender is, similarly to sexuality, figured as variations in ways of being, rather than through any clear—let alone binary— distinctions" (p. 15). Here too, play is guided by the critical. It's not about play making "bad sex" good, but about undermining and supplanting dominant stratifications of sexuality. Paasonen's radical utopianism is a powerful vision of play as liberation and the fulfillment of critical theory's dream of unfettered emancipation.

However, framing play as critical and subversive must tarry with the long history of capitalism co-opting subversion for commodification. One wonders if Paasonen's utopian vision of sexuality and play charts a vast deterritorialization that can be reterritorialized by new markets and capital. Wark (2012) once wrote of the tactical use of play by the Situationists that they had failed to grasp "that play of this kind could be captured and made a functional component of

commodification" (p. 95). The subtext is that play and playfulness can become engines of capitalist innovation that reproduce dominant social relations. The key point, we argue, is that play must be guided by politics instead of embraced as subversion for subversion's sake.

4. ONTOLOGICAL PLAY, UNBOUNDED POTENTIAL

The idea that play is a subversive force of critique has laid the groundwork for theories of play that treat it as a concept that unlocks the boundless potential latent in our present moment—a tendency in recent games scholarship that needs to be described and critiqued. The suturing of play and criticality has given rise to a process that we call the ontologization of play—rhetoric around play that treats it as an unbounded potentiality which is constrained by games in both a practical and conceptual fashion. These approaches suggest that play transcends games. Play bears either a capacity to critique and subvert the systems that games reproduce, or, in an inverted fashion, play operates as the freedom within these systems, catalyzing new possibilities without the need for critique or subversion. These ontologizations of play, which treat play as a transcendent facet of being, may seem opposed to one another but synthesize throughout the decade to produce analogous views.

Miguel Sicart's (2011) critique of proceduralism provides a useful foundation for this movement. Sicart critiques proceduralist approaches to game studies, particularly Ian Bogost's (2006; 2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, in order to free play from the rationalist tendency of proceduralism that claims that games are ontologically rule-based and these rules provide the structure of significance (i.e. the message) that players come to understand through playing the game. Sicart's critique of this instrumental version of play being determined by rules and procedures attempts to liberate play from games, but also has the effect of freeing the player from the game. Sicart (2011) argues that proceduralism erases the agency of the player, what he calls the ethics and "embodied singularity" of the player, landing on a humanist argument for the centrality of the player in the event of play: "without the player there are no ethics or politics, no values and no messages. Objects can have embedded values, technology can be political, but only inasmuch as there is a human who *makes* the politics". Thus, the locus of meaning within the game is transferred from the game and its rules to the player and their play.

Ironically, Bogost dialectically integrates Sicart's critique of his work into his book *Play Anything*. In this text, Bogost presents an inversion of the appropriative quality of play that Sicart theorizes in *Play Matters* (2014). For Bogost (2016), just as for Sicart, anything can be played (pp. 105-107). However, Bogost refuses the subversive potential of play that Sicart ascribes to play's ability to appropriate contexts. For Bogost, play is not that which appropriates contexts, it is that which emerges from contexts (i.e. from constraints): to play the world involves giving oneself over to the conditions of reality, welcoming the

system of objects we encounter in the world, not resisting it. For Bogost (2016), playing is accessing the play in the system (the looseness, the constitutive gaps that permit the system's functioning) to discover the possibilities of the real systems we are embedded in (p. 107). Play is not the function of an agent, but of a system of objects and their material properties: as such, Bogost argues for a humility in the face of objects and their systems of signs which open possibilities within the object-system that humans can explore. For Bogost, play is "submission" to constraints, not their subversion, but it is a submission that unveils the play in the world (2016, p. 99)—a problematic point which suggests that there is nothing in the world that ought to be resisted.

A year after Bogost's *Play Anything* appeared, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemeiux's *Metagaming* (2017) posited a version of play that builds partially on Bogost's (2012) more overtly object-oriented philosophy in *Alien Phenomenology,* while also operating from a partial anti-proceduralist position, and opens by establishing a political and ethical position against the procedurality of videogames specifically. For Boluk and Lemeiux, videogame mechanics are non-negotiable, unmalleable, digitally encoded operations opposed, for example, to the contingent and negotiable rules of tabletop games. Within videogames, play must submit to the rigid mechanistic and material demands of the videogame apparatus, thus preventing any kind of creative mutation.

To develop a distinction between videogame play, understood as total submission to a non-negotiable system, and play itself as distinct from the limiting conditions of constraint, Boluk and Lemeiux graft Catherine Malabou's distinction between flexibility and plasticity onto videogame play and primordial, metagame generating play. For Malabou, plasticity is the ability of something (the 'brain' is Malabou's key object of interest) to give, receive, and annihilate form. Flexibility, for Malabou, is the "ideological avatar" of plasticity and describes the neoliberal co-optation of a more fundamental and transformative plasticity. Flexibility superficially valorizes adaptability and creativity in the context of non-industrial labor in a manner that actually enforces a rigid submission to the skills, ethics, and norms of a world determined by neoliberal capital. Boluk and Lemeiux adapt Malabou's philosophy through their theorization of play, positing a false play (akin to flexibility) and a real play (akin to plasticity). The former operates as a rigid submission while the latter expresses a horizon of pure explosive potential.

Boluk and Lemeiux (2017) arrive at what we might call pure play via their key concept, the metagame, which is "the environment for games" (p. 14-15). The metagame forms the conditions which facilitate the existence of discrete games but which also make discrete games impossible because play always points beyond the immediacy of the discrete game to the game's larger context, the metagame. Rather than a circumscribed magic circle, there is a "messy circle" in which discrete games are permeated by their wider contexts (2017, p. 15). This impossibility of games as such places play in a position of primordial primacy

and metagames as messy postmodern entities that identify "not the history of the game, but the history of play" (2017, p. 17) that breaks free from localized determinations of play which are non-meta games. The endless hunt for the metagame, understood as the system which determines and permeates discrete games, allows us to access the creative plasticity which functions as the primordial core of this endless proliferation of play-environments (metagames) that humans, as socio-historical-economic beings, are constantly doing the work of creating.

We can see Boluk and Lemieux thinking through the interrelation of play and system in a manner that is not unrelated to Bogost's location of play within a larger object-oriented system of reality. Sicart, too, would ironically take this turn towards postmodern meta-systematicity in his more recent theorizations of play, subsuming Boluk and Lemieux's concept of the metagame within the category that Sicart (2022) calls "playthings". The plaything concept completes the player-and-thing circuit of the appropriative agent of play, integrating into Sicart's play-theory a notion of agential-material entanglement. Play, when viewed through the new materialist theoretical lens of the plaything, is no longer located primarily in the playing subject, but in the interweaving of materialities (here understood as agencies) of the human and nonhuman materials within an apparatus which stabilizes play situations. The primordial plaything, then, is an apparatus of play that lies beneath the concepts of toy, game, etc. which secondarily circumscribe this apparatus. Thus, it is similar to Boluk and Lemeuix's assertion that videogames are not games (but ideological avatars of play), where they distinguish the sociomaterial messy apparatus of play from the epistemological paradigm of the videogame.

The political stakes, and potential limitations, of ontological approaches to play can be explained by turning to Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford (2020) who propose the latent capability of distributed and democratic agencies to rupture the neoliberal order. Taking agency to be paradigmatic of videogame play, Muriel and Crawford embrace the Latourian conception of agency in which "from an ontological point of view, agency is defined as what transforms reality one way or another" (2020, p. 140). In turn, agency is understood as "distributed and dislocated…not the direct product of an actor but nor is it the product of a structure": it circulates across human and nonhuman actants (2020, p. 144). Muriel and Crawford insightfully place this conception of agency in conversation with the Foucauldian concept of the *dispositif*, or apparatus, demonstrating that the socio-material assemblages which compose an apparatus set the conditions of possibility for agency. On the cusp of the insight that agency reproduces the power relations that condition it, the Latourian notion of ontological, distributed agency offers Muriel and Crawford a way out of the determining power of the apparatus: the apparatus is necessarily constructed by a circulating and dislocated agency which can restructure the apparatus just as easily as it reproduces it (2020, p. 146). In this theorization, the play of agency is ontological, and the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism is merely an epistemological

veil. The Latourian rejection of structure in favor of a flat ontology of playful, agential distribution produces an overly optimistic view of play as simply needing to be epistemologically rethought, rather than fundamentally re-structured.

Across these approaches, we detect a common interest in producing a primordial concept of play which is ontologically primary, either in its existence beneath epistemic or ideological categories, or in its embeddedness in an ontology of objects. In all of these approaches, there is a recovery of play, where play is creative and liberatory, whether it is subversive or not. Such approaches run the risk of naturalizing play as it exists within the immanent conditions of neoliberal capitalism. We argue that such ontologizations of play must be critiqued, insofar as ontologizing play can have the residual effect of constructing a tautology which ultimately makes excuses for the ideologies of play which proliferate under the totalizing conditions of neoliberal economization. To treat play as ontology is to argue that play itself is the thing that will liberate play from its co-optation by capital: that playfulness is a way out of the commodification of play, because play has a creative potentiality which is omnipresent but either unseen or unappreciated. The idea that gamification, commodification, and the videogame form are veils over play's creative potentiality does not reckon with the possibility that such a creative potentiality is exactly what makes play so useful to contemporary capitalism: that play names a never-ending productivity (Boluk and Lemieux), or a looseness in the system of capital which is necessary to its functioning (Bogost). To treat play as primordially ontological is to develop an analytical system which risks naturalizing the very form of our subjection to capital by arguing that it is the method of our liberation.

5. CRITICAL OF PLAY

There is an implicit counter-movement to these ontological attempts to recover play: the beginnings of a turn against play, in which we see new avenues of engagement and tactics of resisting the playful turn. Some scholars have become critical of play, theorizing its limits, misuses, ideologies, and oppressions. This move against play—the pulling apart of critical and play in game studies to instead be critical of play—involves forms of critique which are similar to those we have discussed, such as queering play that critiques dominant forms of play as buttressing heteronormative ideals in contemporary society. In our estimation, such forms of critique need to be expanded in order to expose the limits of play and resist its ideological uses as a positive, vital force.

Earlier critical approaches to play exposed how power could mold play and sought to liberate suppressed play forms through critique, not by insisting on play's primordial creativity and positivity. Critique's ability to dismantle and expose ideologies also generate new futures, futures which are less oppressive. This is an instructive point for those who see only negativity in critique and affirmation in play. For example, in their influential article "The Hegemony of Play", Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce

(2007) critiqued the constriction of play by the digital games industry, arguing that "the computer game industry narrowed the concept of both play and player in the digital sphere" (p. 309) by focusing on repetitive forms of play that appealed to hegemonic social norms such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and heterosexuality. The authors identified a hegemonic form of play that had become ossified, rigid, and calculated through repetitive commodification and gameplay. As critical theorist McKenzie Wark (2012) wrote of the games industry, "play is now captured and made functional for the same forms, over and over" (p. 95). This hegemonic form of play exemplifies an ideology of play where a codified form of play—militarized and masculinized—appears natural and essential to the industry (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter, 2003).[4]

Beyond such approaches, some theorists embrace a wider critique of play as such. Shared across these critiques of play—which respond to the ludification of culture and theories that ontologize play as a liberating force—is a lack of faith in the pure, innocent, creative power of play or the ability to easily separate play from those hegemonic systems it is supposedly able to subvert. In short, play becomes inseparable from the systems which produce/allow it, and liberating play from these systems threatens to naturalize an ideology of play as a pure creative force instead of acknowledging how play might be complicit with, or collude with, the systems that seem to dominate it.

For Cubitt (2009), play might have been seen as innocent and childlike in the past, but this view attached play to frivolity and superficiality that could be dismissed as immaturity. While play was understood as creative and a source of imagination, it was also separated from life and ignored as unserious and wasteful. Yet, with the rise of immaterial labor and the power of the creative industries, play became useful. Play could be used as a tool to generate creativity and innovation, or to exploit workers by masking problematic labor conditions with enjoyment, what is known as playbour (Kücklich, 2005; Rey, 2014). Cubitt's critique recognized that play "is no longer a utopian force but a property of contemporary capital".[5] On the one hand, Cubitt demonstrates that play is historical through and through. Play does not lie outside of history (as a naturalized, ontological base or instinctual property of the human) but is caught up within processes of historical unfolding which shapes its significance according to social, cultural, technological and political forces.

Similarly, critical theorist McKenzie Wark (2014) entreats us to "Never Play!" as a resistive slogan that supplants the directive to "never work", especially within a world where labor and leisure have blurred. Wark argues that in the "overdeveloped" world, value is extracted from play as well as work (p. 163). The creation of data through play with electronic devices fuels an information economy wherein our play is commodified in various forms. Moreover, Wark (2014) explains, this economy has both a closed-off "game" aspect and an open "play" one: closed game-like systems of data harvesting and selling are joined (and sustained) by open-ended "play actions that map the potential

4. In another example, Thomas Malaby (2007) critiqued play's traditional and normative definitions, thus opening pathways to future, empirical studies of play.

5. Other scholars have critiqued this as "ludic capitalism" (Galloway, 2012, p. 27) or an ideology of playfulness (Soderman, 2021).

space and possible design flaws of the games themselves" (p. 164). Open-ended play in the context of spectacular capitalism is to embody, abstractly, the game designer, contributing to the closed game's next iteration of commodification.

Other scholars, such as Aaron Trammell and Tara Fickle, critique play in terms of oppressive use and racializing functions. Fickle appears to place less faith in recuperative and creative possibilities of play, instead drawing attention to the use of games as a critical hermeneutic for understanding the process of racialization within conditions of American white supremacy. Fickle (2019) argues that the creation and negotiation of parameters and performances of "Asian American"—a complex identity category which simultaneously promises solidarity and liberation while being constrained by its amalgamation of "a massive range of ethnic, linguistic, class, and generational differences" (p. 12)—functions as a ludic site entangled with the problem of political legibility and identity. For Fickle (2019), racialization is a "game of representation", not a "product of in-game representation" (p. 13). Communities are racialized not only through visual representations but through a collective negotiation of a social ruleset. In an evocative example, Fickle describes how the alternate reality game *Pokemon Go* (2016) activates the mechanism of race by unveiling unspoken constraints placed upon the movements of members of different races via the encouragement of players to visit places where their lives are ultimately at risk. *Pokemon Go's* rules function to magnify not erase racial difference by drawing attention to the structuring absences of unspoken social constraints (p. 20). Fickle demonstrates how play, and its critical potential, unveils the rule structures of dominant society and is co-constitutive with systems of racialization and racial oppression, thus articulating how play is not separated from real life. That is, play unveils structuring constraints—the rules of the social game—which ground the impossibility of a pure play untainted by oppression.

Fickle (2019) provides contrast to Bogost's argument that play emerges from submission to constraints and inverts it politically, writing, "To play a game… is not to free oneself from but rather to voluntarily subject oneself to arbitrary constraints" (p. 2). This submission is precisely that form of subjection which is the vehicle for racialized oppression, which also emphasizes the violence of play. Such a feeling of the constraints of play is also articulated by Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) who write, "From the Internet to the constructive worlds of virtual gameplay, the digital world offers spaces of play and freedom in a post-ism promised land of equality and justice, but our experiences reveal the fissures found within those spaces" (p. 5). Here too, the ideological promise of freedom (through play and within a post-race society) are revealed to be illusory, where the fissures in these spaces are not opportunities for resistance, but cracks in the illusion that play is freedom.

Aaron Trammell (2020) follows a similar path, critiquing play from a framework of critical black studies and arguing that "play is wielded as an instrument of power" rather than acting as a liberating, creative activity. Play, as a disci-

plining power, is not (necessarily) embodied in the first case in the procedural contours of a game-structure, but is instead a mode of being that a subject, a player, may project onto an object, the played, in an involuntary manner. When play is nonconsensual, it is still play, because play is voluntary only on the part of the player, who takes on play as a mode of being voluntarily, then exerts the subjective force of that mode of being onto the world, which organizes that world as the "played" object. Play is an exertion of power onto the played: for Trammell, torture then is play (in particular, the torture of black slaves in American chattel slavery) while the brutality and dehumanization which is inherent in torture unveils the disciplinary, objectifying violence of play.

Across these critiques of play, we can identify a common thread of subjectivation/individuation. Play is not the power of a pre-constituted individual subject, rather, play flows through the player, as the product of a regime of power (slavery, racialization, inequality) and/or an ideology (ludic capitalism). Moreover, though uncritically, flawed discourses of play (such as those imbued within hegemonic forms of the mainstream games industry) threaten to undermine a clearer understanding of play in terms of both its potentials and oppressions. This transforms the player into a vector for tainted play and playfulness which, we could say following Wark, works in the open space of potential only insofar as it writes into existence new forms of dominance. Play therefore becomes inseparable from the hegemonies which produce it.[6]

6. CONCLUSION

What does it mean to undertake "critical play" research today? Foucault (1990) once said that the critical attitude is a "way of thinking" that becomes "the art of not being governed, or the art of not being governed like that and at this price" (p. 384). Today, critical play researchers can continue to use play and games as vehicles for social critiques which express political desires to not be governed "like that". However, increasingly scholars and designers must understand play as form of governmentality that requires an attitude that we don't want to play like that and we don't want *to be played* like that. Play cannot be understood simply as a beneficial—or even neutral—conduit for critique. Instead, it is urgent for designers and scholars to be more critical of play and to understand its limits. The ludic turn, the rise of a paradigm of playfulness, the ongoing ludification of culture—these are exciting processes. However, they can fuel ideologies and ontologies of play where play is uncritically understood as a vital force of subversion and transformation, instead of understanding play as a non-neutral form of governmentality through which power can circulate. When Wark claims that the slogan for today's world might be "Never Play" or when Schleiner invokes a "no play imperative" in some instances, they are refusing this circulation and recognizing the limits of play. Such slogans remind us that not playing or choosing not to play might be just as interesting topics

6. As Patrick Jagoda's (2020) work makes clear, since many aspects of play are captured by neoliberal economic logics, speaking of "play" as a concept onto itself is impossible: instead, we have such frameworks as play-*qua*-choice, or play-*qua*-improvisation, which are bound up in specific forms of dominant neoliberal logics that scholars and game designers may seek to overcome and displace.

than play itself. Indeed, the only way to recover a liberatory notion of play may be to refuse play altogether, at least until we have built the proper critical tools.

As a design methodology, critical play is itself malleable, a self-reflexive process of incorporating criticality and the discoveries of critique into the process of design. Thus, undertaking critical play research today requires understanding how play and the critical relate and how they potentially transform each other. It requires a deeper understanding of play's limits, problematic ontologies and ideologies, and integration into commodification. It requires the critical distance of historicization and thus, understanding the history of play—in both practice and theory. Historicizing play, particularly in relation to work, leisure, and struggle throughout the last several centuries, rather than treating play as a transcendental concept, will galvanize new understandings of how play, criticality, critique, and politics operate within different contexts. Indeed, researching critical play today even requires being critical of critique and critical reflection and understanding their limits, histories, and transformations. Such knowledge, then, can be cycled into critical play design practices.

It is instructive to note how generative critiques of play can be. Play and playfulness are often upheld as subversive, as shifting contexts and imagining alternatives, but critique can also catalyze the exploration of alternatives, where suspicion and doubt can identify dominant social norms and rules that can lead to their subversion. Critique does not simply, as Paolo Pedercini once argued, reproduce normative ideologies and structures by repeatedly insisting on the complicity of games in the reproduction of those structures (Murray, 2018, p. 20). Murray offers a rejoinder to Pedercini that critique provides the conditions of self-reflexivity necessary for the creation of non-oppressive forms of play and games. Building on Murray's position, we argue that what traps us in this critical stasis, where media reinvest us into the dominant world order, is not critique but cliché. Criticality not only repetitively denounces (as its detractors suggest) but creates awareness of constraints and limitations which can be observed or subverted depending on the political context.

Today, the dominance of play is demonstrated in a naming convention that has overtaken game studies monographs: *A Play of Bodies* (2018), *Playing Nature* (2019), *Ambient Play* (2020), *Treacherous Play* (2022), and so on. These books are not necessarily about play as such, but about configurations of games and their contexts; nonetheless, they pay lip service to play as the mode in which one encounters these configurations. Play, as a titular, rhetorical convention, can overshadow the specificity of its contexts. No doubt, the paradigm of playfulness and ludified culture will be described, cataloged, and even critiqued. However, when one can ostensibly "play anything," the danger is that play becomes an epistemological obstacle to change, and not an agent of change. The propagation of play—even the propaganda of play—threatens to eclipse a more critical need to understand its limits.

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